

# KARACHI

The top corners of the cover feature two large, stylized eyes. The eye on the left is set against a yellow background and has a red iris. The eye on the right is set against a light cream background and has a blue iris. Both eyes have red, curved eyelids and are looking towards the center.

Our  
Stories

The middle section of the cover is divided into two halves. The left half has a green background with three stylized trees in dark blue. The right half has a teal background with three stylized trees in yellow. The trees have a cross-like shape with a central trunk and three horizontal branches.

in Our  
Words

Edited by Maniza Naqvi

OXFORD

The bottom corners of the cover feature two large, stylized eyes. The eye on the left is set against an orange background and has a white iris. The eye on the right is set against a dark teal background and has a blue iris. Both eyes have red, curved eyelids and are looking towards the center.



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Our Stories in Our Words

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EDITED BY  
MANIZA NAQVI

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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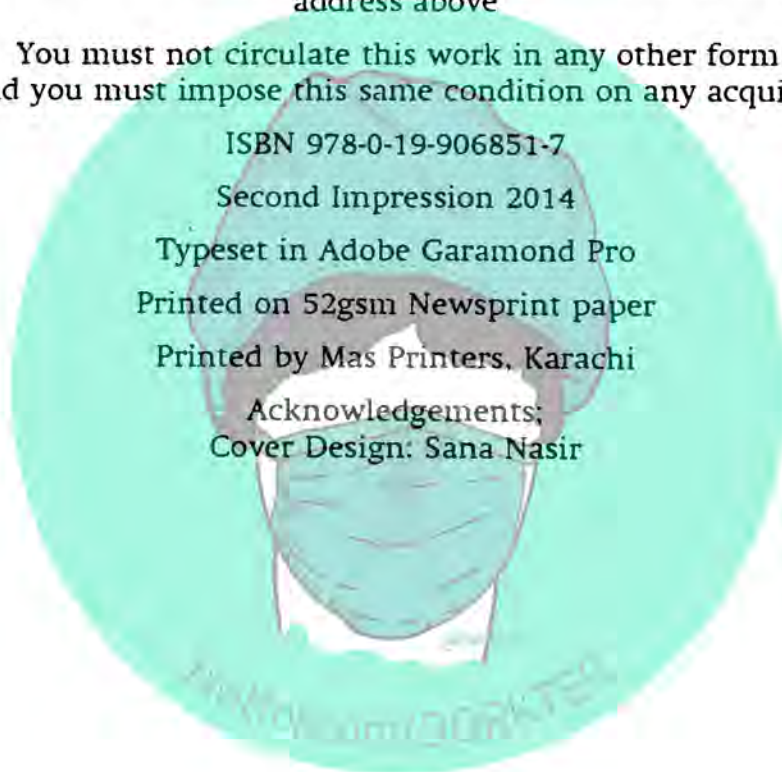
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# *Introduction*

In March 2012, OUP invited Karachiites to participate in the next Karachi Literature Festival in a special way by sending in their own short stories which could be included in a publication for KLF 2013. The invitation was placed in daily newspapers. The deadline for receiving stories was set for 15 May 2012. The first batch of stories started trickling in the beginning of April. Stories arrived in ones and twos every other day. Stories arrived by email and many by post. Some were typed and others were handwritten. And for the next seven months our first readers and editors were kept engrossed. Regardless, all of the stories were read and edited. Those in Urdu and Sindhi were translated into English. For some which did not have one, a title reflecting the story was added in. Contained in this book are 99 of the best stories written in Sindhi, Urdu, and English. The reader might agree that amongst these are talented writers. These stories are written by Karachiites who live in and belong to localities all over the city and also to places all over the country and beyond its borders. These stories, written by many individuals separately, together chronicle the city and its life.

Karachi as the city of prosperity and opportunity is a strong theme: where people from all over the country and continent mingle, live in close proximity, feel modern, and are changed. There are stories of kindness and empathy. And there are themes of deep income disparity and social injustice. There are themes of discomfort and guilt for one's own comfort and wellbeing in comparison to others. There are themes of a desire to rescue, to save, and to do good. There is nostalgia for a time gone by in Karachi, a new awareness of its past history, a love of the beach, the sea, and delicious food. There are stories from the point of

view of victims and murderers. There are stories written from the view point of men, women, girls and boys, and even pigeons and cats. There is deep humor, and there is inconsolable sorrow. There is love: its gain and loss. There is memory and forgetting. There is gambling and betrayal.

The seashore, the beach is a cherished theme: in these stories it is the place where Karachiites are unplugged. There is a deep connection to the sea as the source of all things good, as a refuge, respite, and as a place of relief. The beach is depicted as one of the only places where there is an opportunity to mingle with people from all walks of life. The beach and the sea are the public park, the cherished public good, the commons, and the public asset. And of course there is the all soothing incomparable Karachi sea breeze.

Stress and trauma is a predominant theme: there is a sense of trauma caused by relentlessly repetitive 'breaking news' on television and its accompanying theme music of ambulance sirens, gunshots and bombs, and missives of news bulletins. There is a sense of people watching a constant unrelenting barrage of breaking news, over and over again, amplifying a single incident in one locality to reach the entire city through a bombardment of twenty-four-hour repetition. There is pain in these stories of the loss of loved ones. Deep anxiety about violence, murder, and target killings appears as a constant theme. There is an understanding of the criminality this violence. There is an attempt in these stories to understand the social and economic reasons underpinning the events in Karachi and a real sense of belief and hope for a better future. There is also deep patriotism and belief in the narrative of Pakistan's creation as a homeland.

It has been a privilege to receive and read these remarkable stories.

Maniza Naqvi  
Karachi  
2013



## *Romeo Pereira's Black Bread*

ZARAK MOORAJ

It was eight o'clock in the evening on a typical sultry Saturday in the July of 1970. A dark grey cloud, which had ploughed some northern mountain, hung overhead, uncertain whether or not to drop its load of moisture. Two friends in their early thirties, Jacob Gonzalez and Ignacio Diaz, who worked in Romeo Pereira's Bakery in Frere Street, Karachi, were now off duty. They sat, deep in conversation, in a small tea shop near the tram lines.

'I have a plan which will make us rich, Ignacio. All I need is your co-operation and a little financial assistance,' said the taller of the two, his hair lank with natural grease.

'You're not planning to rob a bank, are you, Jacob?' The question, though flippant, had a direct reference to a film the two friends had seen the previous week in the Capitol Cinema in which two swarthy Italians with shotguns held up the manager of a provincial bank in Naples and cleaned out the vault. 'Besides, we don't own any shotguns.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Ignacio. We're not criminals, man. We are God-fearing, law-abiding citizens, and will operate within the confines of the law. My plan involves an investment—a speculation, if you would like to call it that—which will reap a rich harvest and allow us to do what we've always dreamed of doing. And that is to be able to take a holiday in Goa, the land of our forefathers.'



For a moment Ignacio's eyes turned misty as he pictured those highlands of burnt amber, the sparkling rivers, and groves of mango. But he quickly snapped back to the tea shop in Frere Street. Ignacio was still doubtful. An investment meant using money and that was a commodity of which both friends were desperately short. Ignacio didn't have the slightest idea what the scheme was. He had known Jacob since they had dropped out of Saint Patrick's School in order to earn a living and support their widowed mothers. But a huge return on a small investment? Something didn't smell right. It was all a little too implausible. On the other hand, Jacob might have recently developed a criminal streak of which he was totally unaware. After a while he said, 'All right, let's hear your plan.'

'Before I unfold my scheme I want you to know, Ignacio, that it is a hundred per cent certainty, like having money in the bank. I got the information from the horse's mouth.' A couple of minutes later he straightened up and leaned back in his chair with a look of triumph on his face.

'What you're saying,' said Ignacio. 'Is that a tipster has told you to bet on a horse in the fourth race called Sea Raider and to do the betting through a forecast. How much will we make if the horse comes in?'

'Ah, if the horse that comes second is also a rank outsider, ours may be the only ticket and fetch at least three thousand rupees.' He let that sink in.

'I don't know, Jacob. The whole thing looks terribly risky. Besides, one can never be certain about these things. What if the fellow is lying? What if he's just trying to make a fast buck out of us? You just can't trust people in this line of business!'

'It's not a business, Ignacio! It's a sport! Besides, he can't be making a fast buck out of us because he is not getting any commission.'

'Oh? Then why the hell is he doing this for you?'

Jacob didn't reply immediately. When he did speak it was in a low conspiratorial tone. 'You see, he's from Saint Anthony's parish and has been secretly seeing my sister Christine against my mother's wishes. As I have not opposed the liaison or put any spokes in his wheel, I think this is his way of thanking and repaying me.'

'Well, business or sport, I still don't like it. There's just too much risk involved.'

'All right, if you're not interested I'll go elsewhere.' He had in mind the mechanic with the flowery Hawaiian bush shirts.

Ignacio finally broke the silence. 'There may be, after all, something in what you say. How well do you know this fellow who has given you this information, this fellow who is dating your sister?'

Relieved that Ignacio was finally playing ball, Jacob relaxed and bit into his biscuit. 'Actually I don't know him all that well. Even the information he has given me is secondhand.'

'What? You mean there is a third party in this scheme? This is getting very complicated, Jacob. Do I understand that somebody who is in the know of things has tipped off your sister's boyfriend, and he in turn has passed this information on to you? '

'That's about it, Ignacio.'

'Good God. So your sister's boyfriend is not the original informant! How do we know he has been given the correct information?'

'We don't, but somewhere along the line you've got to trust somebody. We can't be Doubting Thomases all our lives.'

Ignacio looked skywards for inspiration and after a few seconds said, 'All right I'm in! Now how is this thing going to operate?'

'It's really quite simple. We need thirty rupees for the six forecast tickets. I'll put in ten and you put in ten. The third ten will come from a holy source.'

'A holy source? You mean you'll borrow a tenner from Father Coutinho and ask him to bless it?'

'No, no, Ignacio. You know a priest will not bless a banknote! We'll ask Norbie, the verger in the church, to take it out of the collection. . . .'

Ignacio cut Jacob short, 'Have you gone stark raving mad? You know it's a sin to steal from the church.'

'We won't be stealing, Ignacio, just borrowing. We'll put the money back the moment the races are over!' Jacob obviously had it all worked out.

'What if Norbie refuses?'

'He won't refuse. I've already asked him and he said yes. In fact, he was quite tickled by the idea. That tenner will bring us luck.'

'I foresee a problem, Jacob. What if the horse doesn't come in? How are we going to return the money to the collection?'

'We'll cross the bridge when we come to it. Meanwhile trust me, nothing will go wrong.'

'Sorry to keep harping on the informant, Jacob. But how can this fellow, who briefed your sister's boyfriend, be so cocksure that Sea Raider will win the race?'

'A tipster, who gets up at six to watch horses at their morning gallop, told my sister's boyfriend that two days ago Sea Raider did a five furlong sprint in one minute three seconds flat.'

After the Church service the two friends headed for the race course. They had already missed the first race. But that did not matter, as it was the fourth race in which they were interested. They paid their entrance fee for the first enclosure and bought a copy of the official race book. This document gave detailed information on the length of the races, the horses that had been entered, their owners, trainers, and jockeys, and the weight the horses were carrying. There were also tips on which animal was likely to be the winner and which the runner-up. Jacob was delighted to see that in the fourth race Sea Raider had not been mentioned in the first two positions.

'His odds will be excellent,' Jacob said to Ignacio. 'And I hope Rose of Sind comes second as the mare is fetching twelve to one at the bookmakers.'

Suddenly he spotted his sister's boyfriend and the two friends walked over to where he was standing. The boyfriend shook hands with Ignacio and Jacob somewhat awkwardly and said by way of introduction, 'I've just heard that both the jockey and the trainer have passed on information about Sea Raider to quite a few people. This will definitely bring down the odds.'

'Will we at least get a thousand?' Ignacio asked, the vision of a second hand motorcycle floating before his eyes. 'The tote should pay at least that much, because most of the guys who have been given the tip are not the type that go in for forecasts. They will head straight for the bookies.'

'Have you placed a bet on Sea Raider?' Ignacio asked the boyfriend.



‘Of course. I got a good price at the bookies. I have also taken a treble tote, which means that if the three horses I have selected from three different specified races win, I will make a tidy sum. By the way Sea Raider is being ridden by the most experienced jockey in the stables, an Australian by the name of Danvers. As the fourth race won’t start for another hour why don’t I buy you two a plate of Haleem and a glass of cold beer?’

‘What are Danvers’ colours?’ Jacob asked the boyfriend.

‘Purple! A nice royal colour, wouldn’t you agree? Look, the horses have come under the starter’s orders.’ The starter fired his pistol and the horses were off. From where he stood, all Jacob could see was a group of steeds bunched together charging at a furious pace. Now one horse would go into the lead and fall back and a couple of seconds later another animal would assume the leadership and he too would fall back. He couldn’t spot the purple colours and prayed Danvers wasn’t bringing up the rear. The status quo was retained until the bunch rounded the bend. And then, all of a sudden, an incredible thing happened. One horse shot forward and left the bunch standing.

‘Like an arrow from the bow of a Sioux warrior!’ Jacob yelled out the line in excitement. Ignacio and Jacob and the boyfriend recognized the purple colours and as the chestnut flashed past their eyes they gave a yelp which might have been heard by the verger in St. Anthony’s church. The favourite, a mare called Mata Hari, came second, a good six lengths behind the winner. When the jubilation finally ended, the friends learned that the forecast paid two thousand and four hundred rupees, which split three ways, came to eight hundred rupees each. After collecting the money the two friends bid a joyous farewell to the boyfriend and headed for the exit.

Once outside the gate Ignacio said, 'I'll let you hold the money Jacob until we get home and then we'll split it three ways. After all, the whole thing was your idea.'

Jacob accepted the honour graciously and put the money into the pocket of his shirt. The two friends unlocked their bicycles and pedalled for Ignacio's mother's flat. Along the way Jacob whistled his favourite tune and looked up at the sky where birds circled overhead. Suddenly, without warning, a motorcyclist shot out from a side lane and headed in Jacob's direction. Jacob swerved to avoid a collision. In the confusion he lost his balance and fell head first towards an open manhole. A bundle of the banknotes slipped out of his pocket and into the manhole. Ignacio helped his friend up and dusted his clothes.

'It looks like our winnings have slipped into Karachi's sewage system,' Jacob said a little tearfully, 'All that planning and trouble for nothing.'

'To hell with the money, thank the Lord you're safe,' Ignacio said, somewhat wistfully watching his dream evaporate before his eyes. After a few seconds he said, 'Is any of the money left?'

Jacob rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a note. 'Just a lousy ten rupees!'

'I'm afraid we'll have to return that to Norbie,' Ignacio said. 'After all, it is holy money! What is taken from the church must go back to the church.' After a minute or two he continued, 'Let's just hope and pray the boyfriend doesn't lose interest in your sister.'



# *The Old Man and the Pigeons*

SYEDA WAJIHA MARYAM

It was a new neighbourhood, one that gave off the pinched look of something that has grown tremendously in a short span of time. Row after row of apartment buildings reared their cemented heads, their walls leaking the waste of domestic life, their balconies almost touching, leaving only a narrow opening for the Karachi sky. It was the kind of place where everyone was always in everyone else's business since there just wasn't room for privacy. We had moved here temporarily while our house underwent massive renovation. I wasn't too happy with the arrangement but my mom told me we had to make do.

A soft grey clump of feathers clattering onto my desk one steamy hot day in June started it all. My last exam was in two days, and I was doing my best to not doze off while poring over squiggly integration signs when I heard a whoosh, a scrabbling of claws, and a thump. I looked up. There was a pigeon sitting on my desk. How it made its way through my bedroom window's grill, I'll never guess, pigeons are funny that way.

I was mulling over this in my head when I heard the commotion. From my window I could see an old man in the balcony directly opposite ours creating a huge fuss. Actually, 'old' was an understatement; 'ancient' was the word I was looking for. A thousand wrinkles lined his face, and his skin stretched taut across his knobbly hands. It was a miracle he had been able to retain the flecks of grey and black in

his otherwise snow-white hair. He was yelling something unintelligible, clutching the sides of his balcony. I watched, alarmed, as he bent further and further over the edge, he seemed to be leaning far enough over to get a glimpse under it. Just when it looked like he was going to tip over altogether and I opened my mouth to cry out, the door to his balcony banged open. A man came rushing out, and pulled him back up in the nick of time.

‘Father!’ He shouted. ‘Are you trying to kill yourself? What in God’s name were you trying to do?!’

‘I can’t find him. I can’t find him. Where has he gotten to? I know I wasn’t able to feed him his apple pieces today but that was only because we’re out of apples . . . oh he’s punishing me! Where is he? Here, hold me back, I’ll look over the edge, he’s down there, I know it! He’s the youngest, he doesn’t know any better!’

‘Stop it, Father, just stop it! I understand that you’re obsessed with your stupid pigeons but the rest of us have more important things to worry about! Why can’t you act normal for once in your life?’ With that, his son stormed back inside just as angrily as he had come, and the old man burst into tears, his entire body trembling with heaving sobs. Not bothering to stem the tears flowing down his withered face, he slowly made his way to a chair in the corner of the balcony. That’s when I noticed the cage beside it, a cage bursting with pigeons of all shapes and sizes and colours. I didn’t know whether to cry or laugh myself. One thing was for certain, I had to return the one I had found, after witnessing what I just had. I went back to my room, wondering how on earth I was supposed to capture a live pigeon with my bare hands but it proved to be simpler than I had imagined. It simply hopped into my arms when I held out a piece of fruit. Getting the old man’s attention, turned out to be, harder.



‘Excuse me, Uncle?’ I called from my balcony.

No response.

It took a lot of yelling and flapping my arm about to finally get him to look up. But when he saw what I was cradling in other arm, he gave a yelp of delight, and started towards me.

‘Where did you find him?’ he gasped.

‘It was more of a case of him finding me actually! How should I get him to you?’

‘He’s the youngest, you see! He’s never even made a test flight. But now that he’s seen me, he’ll know his way home from here. Let him go. Let’s see if he makes it!’

‘Um, are you sure about this?’ The last thing I wanted was for this crazy old man to throw another tantrum because his pigeon had escaped to the heavens, and I certainly didn’t want to be the one who helped him do it.

‘Yes, yes, yes, don’t underestimate Mubarak.’ He smiled, clapping his hands together.

Mubarak?

‘Okay, if you say so!’ I launched the pigeon into the air. For a second he faltered, but then he opened his wings wide and flew straight towards the old man. He perched on top of the cage, cooing and allowing himself to be stroked.

‘Very good, Mubarak, good boy. I’m so proud of you. I’ll feed you an entire apple tomorrow.’

I laughed outright. And that was that.

But from that day on, I couldn’t help looking over at the balcony with the pigeon cage whenever I had a spare moment. And I began to notice that this old man was as consistent

as a sunrise when it came to caring for his pet birds. Like clockwork, every afternoon around teatime, when the sun's rays set the sides of the apartment buildings aglow, he'd emerge onto his balcony, a notebook clutched in one hand, a bag of seeds in the other and make straight for his pigeons. He'd spend the rest of the evening talking to them, sketching them, cleaning out their nest, feeding them, and letting them swoop up and around our building. What amazed me the most was how they always came back to him. After a week of watching this, I couldn't contain my curiosity any longer. My dad happened to know the old man's son from the mosque, so I worked up my courage and decided to pay them a visit the same afternoon.

The woman who opened the door—presumably his daughter-in-law—seemed taken aback when I told her who I had come to see.

'He doesn't talk about anything but those birds; you won't be able to get a word in edgewise.'

'That's all right, I'll be fine,' I told her as she led me out to the balcony.

The old man's face lit up like a beacon when he saw who it was.

'Ah, so if it isn't Mubarak's savior. Come in, come in. I knew you couldn't stay away from him too long. Mubarak's a charmer, all right.'

That was the beginning of a wonderful summer. I spent most of my evenings with the old man and his remarkable pigeons. I learnt that his name was Kareem, and I learnt a great deal more about his birds. I discovered that Kareem Uncle had names for each of his pigeons. There were seven in total, and if I had had any reservations about all of them being stuffed in one suffocating cage, they disappeared entirely when I got a

good look at the enclosure. Half of it was open to the sky, so the birds could come and go as they pleased. Gradually they learnt to trust me; Kareem Uncle would pour seeds into my hand and I would let them peck it clean. His notebook was filled with endless sketches of his pigeons in various positions, preening, flying, resting.

The next day, something terrible happened. There was a bomb blast near Clifton, and a school van full of kids from my own school was caught in the explosion. I couldn't believe it. The insensitive news reports coming in said that about half of them had died on the spot, and the rest were in 'critical condition'. No matter how much my mom and dad tried to comfort me, I couldn't stop crying. I made my way over to Kareem Uncle's balcony with a heavy heart, hoping to be comforted. But as the afternoon wore on, and he noticed nothing different about my gloomy countenance, instead droning on and on about how he was planning on trying a new mix of seeds that he'd heard would help with the birds' digestion, I grew snappy.

'There was a bomb blast today. Did you hear?'

'Beta, hand me that towel over there; I need to dry out Roma's feathers before she catches a bug, she's not feeling too sprightly today.'

I patiently handed it to him, 'People from my school *died*. I didn't really like Shafaa, she was always so mean to me, but I can't stop thinking about her! She was her parents' only child. How will they deal with it? And what did she even do wrong? She was just a kid!'

'Did you know Mubarak flew all the way to the mall across the street and back today? Little fellow learns more every day.'

'What is wrong with you?! Don't you care?! There's more to life than these stupid birds, Kareem Uncle!' I burst out crying.



He looked up at me surprised, about to say something. But I was in no mood to hear it. I fled home, thinking about how stupid I had been to think a loony old pigeon guy could have all the answers to this troubled world.

Things just got worse from there. They say it doesn't rain, but it often pours, and Karachi was caught in a thunderstorm. There was a series of shootouts in our neighbourhood and elsewhere to settle 'communal differences'. My family was afraid to go out at night, and my mom begged my dad to pray *Isha* at home instead of going to the mosque. I didn't want to live in fear, and I didn't know what else to do except blame the land I had been born in, the city I called home. I no longer went over to Kareem Uncle's house. I couldn't bear to hear him discuss his pigeons with me, knowing he was oblivious to what was happening around us.

The next day, we got an unexpected visitor. It was Kareem Uncle's son and he looked worried, 'Father hasn't been doing well. He refuses to eat anything, and he won't even go out to his pigeons. He's been asking for you. Please come over, we need you.'

I didn't need to be told twice, I was there in a flash. When I saw Kareem Uncle lying on his bed, so frail and thin, I nearly started crying.

'Arfa . . .' he croaked.

'Please, uncle, you've got to eat something or you'll fall sick!'

'I will, I will. But first I have to tell you the story behind my pigeons.'

Again with the pigeons! I clenched my teeth.

'No, hear me out, please,' he said, as though he had read my mind. 'You know my pigeons aren't just any old birds. They go back four or five generations. My father and I saved them

from our burning village during the Partition. It was all we managed to save. We had gone to fetch food supplies from the market, afraid of the violence the coming days were bound to bring. We didn't know they were planning on setting our village ablaze. My mother and my sisters died that night because we couldn't get to them in time. The pigeons were all that remained of my life before the Partition. My father, struck with grief, died soon after. 'Those were dark days, I was alone, I had no one to turn to, but the pigeons gave me hope. I found a job, made a place for myself. I married young; she was a beautiful woman, my wife. And she understood how important the pigeons were to me. As long as they lived on and continued to breed, my family would live on too. I know I don't seem to care about anything else but them, and I'm sorry for it. But those birds are the only thing that keeps me going; it doesn't matter how bad things get in this country, at least I know they're still under my care even if nothing else is, and that's enough for me.' His tears fell silently and I couldn't hold back mine either.

I hadn't ever thought much about life in Pakistan but the pieces were gradually beginning to fall into place, it was as if a mist that had enveloped my mind was beginning to lift. As long as you had something going for you in this city, even if it was nothing more than afternoon tea, being able to see the sun rise and set each day, and trusting pigeons feeding out of your hand, there would be a tomorrow. And there would be hope.



## 19th September

ALI ZAIDI

Who's this extra plate for? It's for Nisaro! You know, Nisaro loves *aash*. Haji ate his dinner. It was a tasty *aash* but he did not enjoy eating it. He took a short nap which he was used to taking every day before he reopened his shop after lunch. But he could not sleep. Kaneez, his wife, went to wash the dishes. She washed all the dishes but did not get her usual nap because she knew she would not be able to sleep today.

Later, Haji reopened his shop, his general store widely known as Perchoon-i-Haji. He dusted by hitting a piece of cloth in all corners of his shop and then he sprinkled some water in front of his shop to settle the dust there. He put the jars of different toffees and bubble gums in the front row on the counter. He saw small children coming from the English language centre situated in the alley next door. As he saw them, he felt pure happiness and joy. They came near, and loudly said their *salaam* to Haji one by one. Haji replied with the same enthusiasm to each one. One of them asked for a Maxi bubble gum and a Jolly toffee, another wanted a Ringo biscuit. And another said, 'Haji *lala*, I want a juice. No, not the green flavour, the blue one.'

As they left, Haji's smile also left his lips. Haji resumed reading the newspaper. As usual at 5 p.m. sharp his old friend, Baboo Khadim Hussain, a retired government servant came by to meet him.

'*Salaam, salaam* Haji Jan, *che ahwali?* How are you?'

‘Fine, Baboo. And you?’

‘I’m fine, just little pain in my knee. I’m getting old Haji. Hahaha! You know, you still look much younger than me, although you are twelve years older.’

They both laughed as if it was the funniest joke in the world. Haji came out and waved to a teashop across the road, and gestured with two fingers, which meant: two cups of green tea, with no sugar in it.

Baboo said, ‘Have you heard Haji? General Naqi has also left.’

Haji made a face of extreme surprise and said, ‘Nakoo Baboo? Tell me it’s not true.’

‘I swear. Everyone is shocked.’

Haji sighed deeply. Baboo said, ‘When our army personnel are fleeing, then what can you expect from the rest?’ He went on, ‘Haji, why don’t you go too? Leave this place. Nothing is left over here.’

Haji shook his head slowly and said, ‘People are leaving to protect their future. What would I leave for?’

Baboo regretted having made the suggestion. He knew what Haji meant. Haji closed his shop. He had an unusual walking style of putting his left foot quicker on the road than the other foot. He hated winter for being cold, and yet loved winter for making him sit near the heater. He loved heaters, because it gave him a strange pleasure getting warm and watching TV. Kaneez, who as usual was waiting all day for this *salaam*, responded, and came to Haji, and taking his coat and stick, went into kitchen.

Haji came to his room, sat and took off his plastic prosthetic right foot. It was such a relief for him to do so. Kaneez came, set his prosthetic foot aside, spread the *dastarkhwan* and

brought in the dinner. She set the same *aash* down, with salt and pepper near it. Then they both watched TV in complete silence. There was a programme about the Palestine War. Haji changed the channel. There was a beautiful young female newscaster having a loud discussion with a politician. Haji changed the channel again. It was a National Geographic programme about dogs. He decided to watch it.

Kaneez brought a thick blanket and said, 'It's cold tonight, *haina* Haji?'

Haji nodded. When Kaneez left the room, Haji called out, 'Kaneezooo! Bring my tablets.'

Kaneez felt as if she was a young bride, though it had been sixteen years since they were married. It was only on special occasions that Haji used to call her with her nickname. Haji ate the tablets and they both slept under the blanket while Haji hugged Kaneez by her waist from behind. Kaneez did not move at all. Haji took her hands in his and rubbed them. They both knew but still Kaneez did not move at all. Haji took her chin in his hand and made her to look at him. As Kaneez looked, Haji saw a small drop of tear at the edge of her eye. They both hugged hard and cried, for this was their only remedy.

Haji was awoken by the mullah's *azaan* from the mosque nearby. It was only half an hour earlier that he fallen asleep. He came out from under the blanket with great care not to wake Kaneez. Then he placed a small kiss on her forehead and went to offer his ablutions. Today he felt like offering prayers in the mosque, although it was quite cold. He wore his jacket, prosthetic foot, and a shawl and went to the mosque. After *namaz* all the people greeted him saying, '*Qabol bashad* (May your prayers be answered).'

Haji came out of the mosque but did not go home. He made his way towards a place that gave him solace and peace. It has become really cold, he thought. He began to enjoy the sound of his steps on the frozen soil, creating a rhythmic beat due to his awkward style of walking. And then there came the path full of stones. He always had difficulty crossing this part, having to keep his balance with his prosthetic foot. But he was used to coming here every Friday with Kaneez. With much painstaking effort he reached the road nearby after fifteen minutes and stopped at a large gate. He recited some verses from the Holy Book and then went inside. He went on for another five minutes and reached a small grave. On its monument engraved were the words: Shaheed Nisar Ali, son of Haji Sadiq Ali, age 9 years, 19 September 2005, *Inna lillahi wa inna ilehi raaji'oon*.



## *Patience*

SIDRA SAADAT

It was not a normal celebration; the next day was Independence Day. This was the first time my family had actually and formally celebrated this day. My mother said this was the best time to show patriotism, when it was needed the most. My driver, Khudabaksh, who was fifty years old, was helping me with painting the walls of our house for the celebration. I asked him why he hadn't gone to his village in Bajaur to celebrate the day with his family and friends. 'Must be difficult to travel back and forth for this job. Don't you miss your family?'

'I do, I do miss them always, especially my son,' he said, as he moved the paintbrush back and forth on the wall. He seemed lost in an abyss of thoughts, 'My house was at the back of a barren, tawny-coloured hill. I had made it from mud, straws, and sun dried bricks. I had plastered the mud lining at the backyard for a place to pray. We also had a small well at a distance. My wife would get us water from that well in a round *matka* (pot) every morning before the morning prayers. Her name was Jameela. My son was a plump, little darling. His name was Azan. He had a round face, dark curly hair, and hazel eyes. I blame my wife for making him eat so much, but she pampered him a lot, because he was born fifteen years after our marriage. Every time I used to go back, I would find him in his favourite light grey *shalwar kameez*, it was his way of expressing his glee at seeing me. Even on his last day he was in the same.'

‘Last day? What do you mean, Uncle?’ I cut him off.

‘On his last day, he was wearing the same *shalwar kameez* to show his happiness at my arrival. At the time of the afternoon prayers, I laid my praying mat at the backyard and lost myself in prayer while my wife sent my son to play at the foot of the hills with his friends. As the evening fell I asked where my son was and my wife told me that Azan had not returned since afternoon.

‘We searched the entire area. At one point I told my wife to wait till I come back, as she could not walk further. As I reached the hill I saw a few villagers covering the entire front of the hill. My friend Aziz dragged me away and said, ‘Khudabaksh, don’t tell your wife, my friend. A drone has bombed this area, your son. . . .’

‘I could not hear further; the internal deafening noise of my sinking heart had made everything else hushed. Without thinking I walked to the front of the hill, saying the name of my Lord. I could see the blackened foothill and the mob surrounding it. As I moved, I did not have to push the mob aside, they moved away themselves. And there he was: my darling, sleeping peacefully. The whole world had gone silent. I lifted my son’s body on my old shoulders and walked back to where I had left my wife and laid my son on the ground. My wife ran to him. Then she went quiet. I screamed at her, shook her, beat her, but she would not say a word. Soon the women of the village surrounded her and tried to make her cry until she stood up and walked towards our house as if she was sleep-walking. I followed her in the same manner, with our son on my back. She lay down quietly without a word.

‘That night I buried my love with my own hands. The next morning when I went to wake my wife up, she did not wake up. I envy both of them as they are together but I am alone. I do see both of them in my dreams, but that is not enough

for a lifetime. I am too old to complain now or ask anyone why did this happen to me. Why was my happy little home destroyed? What was my son's fault or my wife's fault? Now I just live these last few years of my life only to pray to Allah that this does not happen to anyone else. And I await the day when I will meet them.'

# *The Victoria-wala*

RUMANA HUSAIN

Imam Bukhsh believes he is about sixty years old, although he could, by his own account of it, as easily be just forty-five. He was just seven when his parents decided to move from Sehwan Sharif to Karachi. Thirty-eight—or was it fifty-three?—years on, he cherishes his childhood memories of Sehwan, where his uncles still live and feel blessed by the great Sufi buried there. Imam Bukhsh grew up in Karachi watching his father drive a horse carriage, the 'Victoria'. When his father died a few years after his mother passed away, Imam Bukhsh inherited the carriage, together with the horse. When the horse died twenty-five years later, Imam Bukhsh was saddened but only for a day. He shrugged his shoulders, counted his money, which wasn't enough to buy another horse and got a loan from a friend—who was also his neighbour—and, together with all his savings, bought a new horse. This horse was five years old.

Imam Bukhsh has not given his horse a name.

'A horse is a horse; how can he have a name?' Imam Bukhsh tells the children who ask him questions while riding in his Victoria to their schools or homes. His main income comes from providing rides to school children. As many as fifteen children ride the carriage at the same time, with at least two of them sitting at the front, with Imam Bukhsh.

Sometimes when alone, Imam Bukhsh would ponder over this business of having a name for the horse. He has been



taking good care of the nameless horse, and that's all a horse needs, doesn't it? If there is anything wrong with the animal, like a fever or an injury, he takes him to Saeed Manzil adjacent to the Radio Pakistan building, where Richmond Crawford Veterinary Hospital located. Even the vet has never asked for the horse's name, Imam Bukhsh wonders. And if the vet doesn't need it, who else does? Who has ever heard of a National Identity Card for a horse? He breaks into a smile at this ridiculous idea. Imam Bukhsh remembers that his father's horses were also nameless creatures, and, although Imam Bukhsh grew up with two of these animals, he is quite certain that the subject of naming a horse never came up. He remembers that when he was still quite young, the first horse they owned was all patchy, and could have been called 'Rilli' or something like that, after the *rilli*; while the second one had a tanned and handsome body, like a wrestler. . . .

Imam Bukhsh knows that if a horse is looked after well, it will live for around thirty years; otherwise it can die in just a few years. He therefore spends about three hundred rupees on *chaara*—the grass, hay, and barley that he buys for his stallion from Lea Market every day. Horses also needed gallons of water; he therefore keeps a large bucket handy for the purpose. There was a public tap at the Pakistan Chowk roundabout where he fills this bucket. Every night the horse and carriage are chained and left close to the roundabout near the Sarnagati Building, but Imam Bukhsh is oblivious to the fact that these buildings were historical landmarks and milestones. He thanks God every morning when he sees that his horse is still there and that no untoward incident happened during the night, and that his horse and Victoria have not disappeared.

Imam Bukhsh lives in the vicinity of the Pakistan Chowk roundabout, close to the Bholu Akhada. He remembers that once upon a time this *akhada*, a muddy wrestling arena, used

to be a landmark in the area. Bholu Pehelwan and Aslam Pehelwan were famous wrestling champions. But gone are the days of Bholu and his brothers' and sons' wrestling legacy. Imam Bukhsh is aware that these days there are 'wrestlers' of all kinds and backgrounds. Every night when he hangs out with his friends for a *gupshup* session, he hears of men—and even women—who flex their muscles in various arenas in this city.

Imam Bukhsh thanks his stars that, similar to Sehwan Sharif, Karachi has its own share of saints and their tombs that protect the city, 'What would otherwise have become of this city?' He and his friends often claim that the only reason it continues to exist—and ensures the existence of its citizens—is the prayers of the long-dead saints. 'Who has heard of a place that continues to thrive with millions of people despite the gun battles, the riots, the arson, the robberies, the *bhung*, the *charas*, the heroin, and the briberies that are a part of this city's way of life now.'

Imam Bukhsh has a wife and two children (there were two more, but they died in infancy). Imam Bukhsh did not attend school, but his children attend a government school. After accounting for the horse and the Victoria's maintenance expenses, and the monthly pay-offs for the loan, he manages to save about 7000 rupees. His wife is not a happy woman, understandably. She craves for new clothes for herself and their children, and for the good food that gets cooked all around her in the neighbourhood, but not in her own kitchen. She also wants to go for rides in Imam Bukhsh's Victoria, especially ever since he told her that, once upon a time, there was a Queen called Victoria who ruled the whole world. Her 'sultanate' included small towns like Sehwan and Sujawal and big cities such as Karachi. Imam Bukhsh's wife's parents lived in Sujawal. 'Baba, she also ruled *wilayat*,' he had said to her. The poor wife was quite shocked and thought that



her father-in-law, Wilayat Bukhsh, was ruled by this woman, but she soon decided that this was probably precisely the reason that he called his carriage 'Victoria' in reverence to the great ruler. Imam Bukhsh's wife did not imagine herself as a queen, but she knew that there was something regal about sitting in a Victoria and being driven about, even though its driver was her own husband.

For Imam Bukhsh, his wife was just like his horse. He worked hard for her, arranged for her *daana paani* and, when she wanted to go out, she also put the blinders or blinkers on her face, just as he did on his horse. He believed firmly that, just as the blinders were needed to keep the horse going in one straight line and direction depending on how Imam Bukhsh held the reins, tightening or loosening them, his wife too would not go astray if he kept a tight rein on her and she put on her *burqa*. She was ten years his junior and he did not trust anyone who was younger than himself. She had a name, but he never used it. Whether he called out for her or referred to her in conversation, it was either as his wife or the mother of his children. When she fell ill, which wasn't too often, thank God, he took her to the shrine in Clifton, but never in his Victoria, as there was a bridge that had to be crossed, and Imam Bukhsh knew that horses and carriages were not allowed to cross over the bridge. His wife never believed his stories about the bridge. She had once seen, with her own eyes, that horses and even camels frolicked along with people on the sandy beach beside the great ocean at Karachi.

'Rubbish, Imam Bukhsh,' she always said when he made her travel by bus. He helped her climb the women's compartment, and made his own way to the men's section from there, so that he was close enough to be able to keep an eye on her. One day Imam Bukhsh picked up four giggly young women—college students from Frere Road—who wanted to be dropped off at Eid Gah. The girls struck a deal with him

for the fare and didn't stop to breathe as they chattered all the way. Even the horse's ears pricked up continuously, trying to pay attention to the girls' prattle. When they reached Bunder Road, one of them craned her neck and, looking up at Imam Bukhsh, asked for his name.

Imam Bukhsh almost fell off from his coachman's high seat. No one had ever asked his name. It was always strictly a negotiation about destination and fare. 'Why do you ask?' he responded, somewhat roughly, trying to conceal his wonder and delight.

'Oh, it's nothing. We were just discussing our home assignment, and we have to write something about a Victoria *wala*, so it will be good to know what type of names your type of guys have,' the girl said casually.

Imam Bukhsh pondered at some length about this. He looked at all the people walking on the road, or travelling inside buses, taxis, rickshaws, motorbikes, and private cars. He also glanced at the shopkeepers, their salesmen, and shoppers at the outskirts of the Jama Cloth Market and the Eid Gah shops across. He was searching for a suitable name to tell the girl, as his own name seemed archaic, and one that came with a label: all 'Victoria *walas*' had similar names—Imam Bukhsh, Wilayat Bukhsh, Rasool Bukhsh, Raheem Bukhsh. He mulled over the names of his family's male members, even those who still lived in Sehwan, but could not come up with a single name that was different. He looked at the posters and billboards all around, and tried to remember the names of the men whose faces were plastered there.

He concluded that, just like his wife and his horse, he too would remain nameless.



## *The Malir Tooth Fairy*

NARGIS KHANAM

The silence of the house was shattered by his daughter's high-pitched mournful cries. The teacup slipped from Rashme's hand and crashed to the floor. Gul Khan feared some dreadful accident. His heart was pounding as he raced towards his daughter's room.

'What happened? Where are you hurt, *bacha*?' There were no broken bones, no blood, not a scratch or a bee sting, but the child was obviously in great pain. Gul picked her up in his trembling arms, caressed her, and wiped her tears and dripping nose. She opened a fist to show a pearly milk tooth lying on the wet palm. He and his wife were relieved that it was nothing serious which was the cause of their daughter's tears.

'You lost a tooth? Don't worry, a new tooth will grow,' Gul and Rashme said in one breath. But the child wailed most pitifully, 'The tooth fairy didn't take my tooth.'

What tooth fairy? Gul had never heard of such a creature. In Peshawar, as in any other place, stories were told about mischievous *jins* and *parees*, but none of them stole milk teeth. Gul suspected this was an English myth the child had learnt at the English school. English story characters were despicable and as contemptible as the English themselves. Some characters were an offence to the *Pakhtunwali* code, such as that dastardly Father Christmas, a *na-mehrum*, who entered a girl's room at night. Even if it was just make-believe,

it was disgraceful. He did not approve of a thieving fairy either.

Feigning anger, Gul said, 'I will not let this wicked fairy steal my precious Moon's tooth. Give it to me, I will guard it.'

But the child tightened her fist. In between sobs she said, 'The tooth fairy is not a thief! She gives money for the tooth she takes away at night.'

So, yet another night visitor, thought Gul with growing anxiety, but at least this one was female. Gul's determination to not allow English ways to infiltrate his home was badly shaken by the tragic howls of his little girl. He would do anything to pacify her, even if he had to stoop to the low level of the English.

'Does the tooth fairy give real money?' he asked.

'Yesss,' wailed the child. Then, obviously, a person had to pretend to be the tooth fairy, but who? Gul looked questioningly at Rashme. She was behaving oddly; maybe their daughter's grief had traumatized her too. She was making comic gestures, jabbing a finger at him and then flapping her hands. And she was grinning. After a few more jabs and hand flapping the message got through.

'Ah,' said Gul and his face turned pomegranate red. Was he, a full-blooded Pathan, to pretend to be a fairy? But his daughter's sorrow cut Gul's heart into a thousand pieces; he would demean himself to make her happy. 'The tooth fairy will come tonight,' Gul announced resolutely in the heroic tones of a man ready to sacrifice himself for a good cause.

His sad daughter shook her head. 'The fairy will not come again,' she wailed.

Gul desperately searched for a plausible reason for the return of the tooth fairy. 'Maybe she had no money. How much do



## THE MALIR TOOTH FAIRY

I—er, er—I mean the tooth fairy, how much does the tooth fairy give for a tooth?’

‘Farida and Amina got one rupee,’ said the girl.

That night Gul sneaked into his daughter’s room, took the tooth, and left five rupees under her pillow.

Years later, Peshawar was no longer Gul’s home. Ever since Rashme passed away he had lived in Karachi in his daughter’s house. Gul did not like the confusing chaos of people from all over Pakistan who lived in Karachi. After the third-day prayers for the dead, his son-in-law and daughter had stood anxiously in the doorway and sent their son in, a three-year-old charmer who could make his grandfather agree to anything. They told their son that his Nana was sad because he had lost Nani. The boy understood Gul’s sadness because he was also sad when he lost a toy. Then Abba would hug him and promise to get a new toy.

The boy crawled onto Gul’s lap and hugged him, ‘Don’t cry Nana. When you come to live with me Abba will get you a new Nani.’ Although Gul disliked Karachi, there was nothing left for him in Peshawar now that Rashme was no more.

From the day he was born, the boy was Gul’s entire world. His love for his daughter took second place now. Now he cherished mementos of the boy: a pair of booties, a baby’s vest, and a cute cap were hidden in his old suitcase. So when the boy’s first tooth began to shake a little, Gul polished his beloved Rashme’s tiny silver box in which she had kept cardamoms. He went to the bank so he could get ten one-rupee coins, taking a long time to select the brightest and newest. He stuffed the silver box and coins in a stocking, wrapped it in newspaper and hid the packet on top of the cupboard in the room he and the boy shared. Each day he examined the tooth. He told the boy not to wiggle the tooth

because God would not let a new tooth grow and the boy would be toothless forever. Only Gul was allowed to touch it. Silently, Gul asked God to forgive these necessary lies.

On the day the tooth was probably going to fall, Gul was alarmed when the boy's father announced an overnight picnic at a farm in Malir, to which he had invited several friends. Gul disliked picnics. His Pakhtunwali code did not permit tomfoolery such as this. The people of Karachi had no dignity; their idea of fun was loud music, loud laughter, and screaming and screeching like monkeys.

On the drive to the farm, the boy sat on Gul's lap. A dull ache in the loose tooth made him irritable.

'When will we reach the farm? Drive faster, Abba,' he whimpered incessantly. At last the car turned into the farm gate and stopped before a large bungalow nestled under a magnificent banyan tree. There were guava, mulberry, and tamarind trees all around, and the chief attraction—a swimming pool. The boy immediately forgot to fret and shot out of the car, stripping his clothes as he ran to the swimming pool. Some picnickers had arrived early and their children were frolicking in the pool.

'Come and get it!' yelled the women at lunchtime. Gul frowned. Couldn't just one person call everybody? Did all of them have to yell? Even his daughter, who was not Karachi-born and who was brought up by Rashme, had picked up noisy habits. The men and children attacked the food, grabbing sandwiches and cold drinks and began to eat in haste, probably without saying *Bismillah*. The famished boy hastily bit into a sandwich and yelped. The tooth had broken off. There were tears in his eyes and a lopsided grin on his lips as he held up the tooth for everyone to admire. Children excitedly explained the tooth fairy routine to the boy whose



eyes sparkled at the prospect of receiving money. The boy loved money. All Karachi people loved money, thought Gul.

Gul marvelled at the energy of the boy. All day long he was in and out of the swimming pool, playing hide-and-seek among the trees, chasing the chickens and the farm dog. When it was long past his bedtime, Gul could wait no longer. He picked up the boy and took him inside. Gul bathed him and tucked him into bed. The boy took one last peek at the tooth under the pillow and, with a satisfied sigh, fell fast asleep. Gul gently removed the tooth and slipped the coins under the pillow. He placed the tooth in Rashme's silver box. Tomorrow when he would back at home, and on many tomorrows he would look at his treasure again and again. Gul was tired too and soon fell sound asleep. He was unaware of the silent parade of men, women, and teenagers stealing in and out of the room.

Next morning the boy woke up early. Gul was already up and waiting impatiently for the boy to discover the ten shiny new one-rupee coins. The boy threw back the pillow.

'Look, Nana, a zillion million rupees!' the boy shouted gleefully. Shock was written large on Gul's face as he stared at the great mound of cash. His shiny coins were lost in a pile of notes, and copper and silvery coins. Other children came running in, wanting to know how much money the tooth fairy had left.

'A zillion million,' shouted the boy.

'Wow!' said a child, 'The Malir tooth fairy is very rich. The Karachi fairy gave me only ten rupees for my tooth.'

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## *Our Last Azaan*

ASMARA MALIK

### *I. The Streets of Our City are Lined with Synapses*

Islamabad's silent streets are filled with phantoms. Tongueless ghosts raise their haunted eyes to the night sky. The stars fall, one by one. There are no screams in our city tonight. No mother weeps for a son who will never return home. Our city is a tomb, echoing with the tinnitus of oblivion. The steps of Faisal Masjid are cold beneath our feet. The bone-white shards of the mosque's four towers outline the invisible square of the Kaabah around us. We walk hand in hand to the heart of the mosque. The lights of the central chandelier grow dim, flickering like synapses in a dying brain. Then go out. The mosque becomes a shadow land of ancestral voices, some weeping quietly, some haranguing against the inevitable. Azrail takes us each by the hand. His hand is warm. His face is the face of a childhood friend, someone you thought you'd forgotten. His eyes are kind. When he speaks your name, you hear the sound of playgrounds and pianos, warm blankets, and your pet cat dozing in your lap in the quiet of night. Azrail walks hand in hand with each of us. A million of us: millions and millions of us.

I ask him if this is the end. No, he smiles, this is only the beginning.

### *II. The Streets of Our City are Lined with Arteries*

If love is Lahore, then the Mall is a mother-in-law. Overbearing and loud, she is the road of roads, all streets in



Lahore lead eventually to the Mall. It is not love that walks the Mall tonight. It is Mikail of the Rains. It is not love that stays his hand, it is nostalgia, bitter as a bruise on a bride's face. He watches from the pavement as a young woman, painted hands clutching the folds of her *chaddar* close to her face, walks carefully in her high heels to a waiting limousine, darkly gleaming under the streetlights.

The beating heart of Lahore is a siren-song to his ears, unapologetic. Lahore is a queen. Mikail is just another warrior-king. He kneels upon the rough surface of the pavement, the sodium yellow glow from the flickering street-light turning each line on his face to a crevasse. His hands melt past the ground, reach deep, deep, deep down. He pulls out the heart of Lahore, pounding fiercely, still so unafraid. Jibrail kneels beside him, his arm around Mikail's shoulders. Mikail closes his eyes, the sound of distant thunder rising from the West. He kisses the warm heart, beating, beating, beating. The black blood of Lahore clings to his pale lips. Good bye, my love, he whispers to his city of a thousand monsoons. Thunder roars in the sky. *Fajr* . . . the *azaan* is a drowned voice, supplicating in the darkness. Dawn. The rising sun sets the eastern horizon afire.

### *III. The Streets of Our City are Lined with Teeth*

It is the night of the red moon. Jibrail has walked to Quetta. The winter-eyes of his city regard him; bleak as a desert, cold as a cat lying dead by a gutter.

Quetta in the knife-edge between night and dawn. Pale streets lined with icicle-teeth hanging from rusted street-lights. The streets are harsh on your feet this late at night. Jibrail fools them into believing him a ghost from Makran. Now, they are gentle. They remember the sea in his stride, in his perfect blue eyes. They remember the long-ago rivers beneath their metallised skin. They treat him as a distant friend.

He walks to the middle of a forgotten street, scrapes gently with his square, peasant hands. It yields easily. He plants teeth, deep within the heart of Quetta. These are the seeds, the dreams of a thousand unchanged beings—Sleeping Beauty reigning over the Chiltan Mountains, the drowned Lady of Hannah Lake, the nameless monster of Koh-e-Murdar. He plants them in remembrance. One day they might blossom in a new world—porcelain flowers thorns of canines and incisors, blooming in a garden where too-wise children play with monsters, unafraid.

Not heaven. Not hell. Some bridge between the two, some union between the dissonance.

The dark sky of Quetta is a blue-black bruise. *Fajr*—the voice of the *muezzin* like an iris, dilating in the dark. Jibrail covers the earth and whispers a prayer. Israfeel of the Mountains hears the voice of Jibrail and closes his eyes. Beneath his feet, the mountains of Sulayman tremble. He raises the horn to his lips. Dawn. It is the Last Day. The sun rises from the West.

#### *IV. The Streets of Our City are Drowned in the Sea*

I'm not sure who walks the frigid, Friday-lit streets of Karachi this morning. I'm not sure whose lank frame casts this bleak shadow on the tar-black surface of the cold streets. It could be Iblees. It could be but I'm not sure.

The world looks dim through this smoked glass window. He walks beneath the flickering street-lights, clutching his sad plastic bag of pallid vegetables. His eyes are dimmed, his face salted with the dried husk of tears shed not so long ago.

Iblees walks the empty streets of the City of Lights, calling the name of his Beloved over and over and over and over again. God is silent. Empty skulls peer at him from darkened window-sills. Iblees knocks on every door.

‘Hello?’ he calls in this grey shadow-world. ‘Hello?’

Karachi is what’s left standing on the morning after  
Judgement Day.

Karachi is Hell.

## *The Heirloom*

FARAZ MAHMOOD

It was Tuesday and the dawn had barely broken through the dark velvet horizon. Mehtaab reluctantly splashed cold water on his face. The dreariness in his eyes wasn't lingering sleep, but rather the physical accumulation of years of emotional distress and much toil. Remnants of drowsiness were attacked by the frosty sting of the water; causing his eyelids to flicker uncontrollably, flashing fragments from the pages of his life.

An unappetizing breakfast comprising stale tea and a slice of dry toast awaited Mehtaab. He closed his eyes and gulped it down. Putting on the official *khansama* uniform confirmed the drudgery of another day, but at fifty-six, Mehtaab had a lot to be grateful for. In a nation overflowing with starving refugees, destitute and abused minorities, multiple mafias of thugs and beggars alike and not to mention the corrupt proletariat, Mehtaab, in comparison, was employed in a bank, serving tea and biscuits to all the officers, the importance of which could not be underestimated since at least forty per cent of a typical workday is expended in extensive tea consumption.

6:45 on the clock meant that Mehtaab must now head out as it would require a twenty-minute walk and the switching of two buses to get from Lyari to Defence. He strapped on his tattered moccasins and slipped on his ring—the only prized possession in his otherwise bare existence. A beautiful piece of craftsmanship comprising of a thick gold band and a solid, uncut chunk of deep emerald; presented to him



on his eighteenth birthday and on the completion of his intermediate education; a ring passed on over generations, marking the official initiation into manhood. It was a day of glowing pride for him, the memories of which still struck the delicate cords of nostalgia. He remembered the feeling like it was but a moment ago—the minute he wore that ring for the first time and vowed to himself that never, not even under the most desperate of circumstances, would he ever sell it. It was a reliquary of his singularly reputable soul, now fading into a mere reflection of its former self. Now he took life, one day at a time.

8:25 a.m.: An immaculately dressed man was driving a shiny black Mercedes E Class, through the scanty early morning traffic of the Defence area. Adnan Rohela had just been appointed the Senior Executive Vice President of a prominent international banking franchise. The Mercedes cruised through the streets while its driver pondered over several random thoughts: his official targets, the agenda for the staff meeting scheduled later in the afternoon, the lunch with his VIP clientele which included several industrial tycoons setting up their factories in various villages surrounding the edges of the city, the delivery of the three new Armani suits that he had recently ordered. And of course the most important plan of all: moving into a staggeringly luxurious *kothi* in Defence where he would surely be entertaining people of great wealth and influence.

As Mehtaab was getting ready for his morning duties his supervisor walked in and told him that his duties had been reassigned as the personal *khansama* for Mr Rohela, who was dissatisfied with his tea boy and had demanded instituting someone with more VIP experience in his place. Mehtaab was, therefore, instructed to immediately report for duty on the top floor. He reluctantly knocked on the large wooden

door, glamorously embossed with the big boss's name and designation.

'Come in,' said a stern voice at the other end. Mehtaab walked into a plush and rather large office with a wall to wall window overlooking the busy market place and a residential area of Clifton.

'Salaam, sahib.'

'Have you been briefed about your duties here?'

'Yes, sahib.'

'I like my tea hot and strong at least three times during the day. You'll also be responsible for ordering my lunch every day; my PA will inform you about what to get. Make sure it is on the table no later than one p.m. Oh, and it's a part of your job to carry my laptop and other personal items to my office in the morning as well as to my car in the evening and they must reach my desk before I do; I don't like to be kept waiting. I'll be observing you over the next two weeks; any irregularities will result in your immediate removal from this position and a formal reporting to the admin supervisor. Is that clear to you?'

'Yes, sahib.'

'Where do you live?'

'In Lyari, sahib.'

'It would be wise on your part to note that I do not tolerate tardiness! I don't care how far you live or how long it takes for you to get here, if I don't get my morning cup of tea, the consequences for you can be quite severe. Do you understand?'

'Yes sahib.'

‘And how exactly does an old *khansama* from Lyari come to afford a ring like that?’ Rohela asked with a cynical expression.

‘It belongs in my family, sahib. My grandfather was the Chief Hafiz of our village; the ring was given to him as a gift and is passed down to the next generation at the completion of intermediate education!’ Mehtaab explained with a reminiscent smile.

‘Fine, fine! Just go and get me my tea please!’

Mehtaab walked out with a queasy stomach at the prospect of having a permanent working position under this individual who, in less than five minutes, had stripped him of all his dignity and had successfully managed to remind him of his puny little place in the universe, as if his everyday existence wasn’t reminder enough of that fact. A few days passed, with Mehtaab constantly on his toes, struggling to keep up with Rohela’s impromptu demands and trying very hard to stay up to the mark.

On a not so unusual evening, as Mehtaab was walking down with Rohela to the parking garage, they were greeted with a revolver pointing directly at them. It was in the hands of a poor man who by no definition fit the description of a petty cell phone robber. His apparent age, his respectably groomed silver grey hair, and the general look of deep regret and overwhelming emotion gave him a kind of dignified appearance.

‘What is this? Who are you? What do you want?’ Rohela blared at the man, trying to project anger but manifesting only fear.

‘I’m not here for your wallet or your mobile, *barre* sahib!’ the man retorted with disgust. ‘I want compensation from the stealer of lives! I want your life, as payment for the lives you stole from us!’



'What is this rubbish? What are you talking about?' Rohela shouted, now visibly quivering with dread.

'I've heard your name in the news and seen it in the papers. The captain of industry, the paragon of progress, bringing an industrial revolution to the rural heart of the city. But you are snatching our souls from under our skins! It was your people who drove out hoards of families from their homes with fraudulent documents and force of arms. You're the reason we've watched our crops and animals bulldozed to the ground, and watched our families starve to death. You're the reason why our children caught diseases and died under the open sky with no roofs over their heads. But you will pay me back now *barre* sahib . . . in blood!'

Rohela's eyes stretched wider with horror. He stood petrified, desperately searching for words to pacify the intruder. A deafening blast from the revolver resonated through the thick circular walls of the underground parking garage.

Several minutes later, the parking garage was crawling with police officers, ambulance workers, and some general public gathered to see the show. In one corner, the police had detained a man with a shocked expression frozen on his face after the unexpected turn of events; in the other, Rohela sitting on the floor leaning against a pillar and somewhere near the middle, Mehtaab on a stretcher with a flesh wound in his left shoulder. Why had he hurled himself in front of Rohela as a human shield was as much a mystery to him as it would be to anyone else in his circumstances.

Several weeks later, Mehtaab found himself frantically rushing towards Rohela's opulent office, his left arm and hand in a cast and lungs running short of breath with every step. He knocked fervently and entered.

'Have you come to rejoin your position? Your substitute is doing a decent job and besides, you honestly don't seem like you're in a position to do any productive work. . . .'

'Sahib, please! I'm here because I've run into some desperate circumstances. My wife is gravely ill and I have no medical coverage from this job. Both my sons have lost their respective employments because of cutbacks. I have nowhere else to go. Please sahib, I would really appreciate any help that you can give me,' Mehtaab pleaded.

'I may empathize with your situation, however, I have no control over HR policies. If you have not been provided with a health policy, then you need to take it up with the HR manager. It has nothing to do with me.'

'Sahib, please, I beg you! Can you not help me in anyway? I took a bullet for you, sahib. I laid my life on the line for yours! I have come to you now in my hour of dire need and distress!'

'Life is a process of natural selection, Mehtaab, so that the universe remains in balance. Your decision to block that bullet was simply life's way of preserving the more important individual. I'm the captain of industry—many lives depend on my existence. You, on the other hand, are a slum-dwelling nobody whose life serves no real purpose. Fate simply chose accordingly—it's a fair trade, and you're lucky to be alive.'

'Is this the by-product of wealth and success? A cold heart and a vacant soul?' Mehtaab sighed, eyes welled up with tears. 'I was wrong to come here and expect graciousness. . . . I took that bullet for you but I knew in my heart, that all those things the man said about you were true. . . . Every word! And I still kept it to myself!'

'Are you trying to blackmail me?' Rohela snapped with a mixture of rage and nervousness at the prospect of a possible

loose end. He pressed the button under his desk and two guards entered the office immediately.

‘This man is soliciting for money and making a nuisance of himself. Remove him at once!’

As the guards grabbed Mehtaab, he added, ‘Wait, I had misplaced a rather valuable piece of jewellery a few weeks ago during his duties here, and have yet to find it . . . search him!’

The search instantly revealed a large gold and emerald ring hung in a chain round Mehtaab’s neck on account of his inability to wear it on his finger which was covered in the cast.

‘Ah . . . Clever of you to hang it round your neck so it wouldn’t be discovered in your pockets, Mehtaab!’

‘No! Please! It’s mine! This is a lie! It’s my family crest! You cannot do this!’

‘Yes! Indeed! A family crest like that belonging to a *khansama* from Lyari?’ The sarcasm in Rohela’s voice pierced Mehtaab’s senses. ‘Throw him in the local district *thana* for a few days, give him something to think about! Maybe it’ll clear up his deficient logic before he tries to challenge me again!’

Our fates are intertwined, like intricate threads on a loom, joined together by an instrument of cosmic significance. Mehtaab’s ring was the most valued ornament of his life. It gave him purpose and continuity, and an intrinsic worth to his existence which only he could understand and appreciate. Little did he know that it would ultimately be the instrument leading to his ruin. Or, shall we say, ‘liberation’!

The next morning while Mehtaab sat weeping in his holding cell, someone had managed to slip through security at the bank, and moments later the surrounding shops and streets were cataclysmically shaken by a powerful and resonating



blast, the effects of which were felt for miles in all directions. The official report shed light on the perpetrator who belonged to a regional fundamentalist group, lately targeting the non-*shariah* compliant financial sector that deals in various aspects of usury and interest. The grand building and its plush offices were instantaneously reduced to rubble and the identification of victims through the examination of charred body parts, DNA, and dental records was a mammoth task that was yet to be undertaken by the forensics experts.

Life certainly is a process of natural selection. In the grand scheme of things, life, after all, chose the honourable pauper over the crooked rich man. The grand design works in surprising ways. In a single sweep of destiny's broom, Mehtaab lost his livelihood, his prized possession, and to some extent his dignity, but gained his life! A corrupt bureaucrat dies, a *khansama* lives . . . fair trade!

## *Need—The Great Equaliser*

NIZAMUDDIN SIDDIQUI

By the time his son was born, Nasir had become such a cynic that he had started coining wisecracks to fit all kinds of situations. So, in his view bottled water was not just water but a means of separating the ordinary Karachiites from the chosen ones: those who had made it in the world. The reason for Nasir's bitterness was simple. After the birth of his first-born, a girl, he had come down from Badin to Karachi in the hope that the '*ghareeb parvar*' city would treat him well. However, he had found that life was just as difficult in Karachi as it was in his hometown.

It wasn't that Nasir hadn't found a job in his hometown. Rather, in his infinite wisdom, the first matriculate of his extended family thought that he would manage to earn a decent living in the metropolis. So he moved to Karachi with his wife, Jamila, and daughter, Anjum. But once in Karachi he found that it had its full share of poor people. Some were so poor that they slept on the footpath. They ate and even bathed on the footpath, and they did this in the full view of people wearing spotless clothes and being driven in Corollas or Civics to their flashy, posh offices.

Nasir started off as a labourer, working as a 'beast of burden' in the factories in Korangi Industrial Area, which was not far from Zia colony, the *katchi abadi* where he lived with his family. Along with the other job-seekers, he would line up near the gate of a factory by 7 a.m. each day and wait for the manager to come out between 7:15 and 7:30 a.m.

to hire three or four men to make up for the workers who were absent that day. If Nasir was among the chosen few for the day, he would thank God for His mercies and enter the factory content in the knowledge that his family would not go hungry that day. If not, he would go to the next factory to try his luck.

Nasir soon realised that he needed a permanent job, not daily labour. An old friend of his helped him land a peon's job in the office of a newspaper. He was offered a monthly salary of only 4,250 rupees but accepted the job because it was permanent work. However, the newspaper job largely failed to lift Nasir's spirits and to change the state of his mind. Moreover, he became more aware of the issues that concerned the poor. The more he worked with the journalists the more he realised that the poor had no one to turn to. He found out that even though the journalists knew fully well about the raw deal the poor were getting, they did hardly anything to change the situation.

But then there was a pleasant change in Nasir's life when Jamila gave birth to a beautiful boy. Both Jamila and Nasir were overjoyed. However, the joy was short-lived for Nasir because a new family member meant additional expenses. He informed his boss of his problems and requested him to raise his salary. The boss asked him a lot of questions—'How many years have you worked for this organisation?', 'How many children do you have besides the newborn?', 'Where do you live?' etc. When he was convinced that Nasir was not one of those poor people who had a child to show for every year of their marriage and that he had worked for the newspaper for a sufficient number of years, the boss promised to look into the matter.

About three months later, he told Nasir with great flourish and excitement that his salary had been raised by 500 rupees. Nasir knew that the raise was insufficient to meet the rising



cost of living let alone the expenses of a newborn. But he thanked the boss and also shook hands with all the staff who took turns in telling him how lucky he was to have an extremely kind man as a boss. All this made Nasir angrier. He soon started talking to himself rather loudly. One day Jamila caught him cursing himself—simply for having contracted what he called a ‘poor man’s disease’. ‘*Ghareeb aadmi, tujhe bimari bhi ghareebon wali hi hoi. Agar tere paas paisa hota to tera pait kharab thodi hota; tujhe yaa to sugar hoti, yaa tujhe heart attack hota.*’ (‘You poor man, even your disease is that of the poor. If you were rich, you would have had an upset stomach; you would have had diabetes or a heart attack.’)

From the very beginning, Jamila had tried to empathise with Nasir. But she had no idea what was going on in his head. But having heard her husband mutter what she thought was rubbish she knew that he was in deep trouble and needed help badly. The next day when Nasir was feeling better and was getting ready to go to office he said something which made Jamila realise that she had to act fast, ‘You know, Jamila, the road that takes us poor people to work hasn’t ever seen a wedding procession go from Korangi to Defence, or from Defence to Korangi,’ said Nasir.

‘You mean to say that no Korangi man has ever wed a Defence girl and no Defence man has ever married a Korangi girl?’ asked Jamila.

‘Yes, that’s exactly what I mean,’ Nasir said. ‘I don’t think any family in Defence has ever given away their daughter, or even their son, in marriage to a family in Korangi,’ he said. Jamila began thinking of how she could help her husband overcome their financial problems. Later that day, she discussed the matter with her friends who advised her to do something which earned at least 3,000 rupees a month.

When Jamila told Nasir what she wanted to do and requested him to look for ads in newspapers for maids, he lit a cigarette and began pacing up and down the small courtyard. After about ten minutes, he said he would help her get a maid's job in Defence. The following Sunday, the couple took the same road that, according to Nasir, had never seen a wedding procession go from Korangi to Defence, as they began their search for a maid's job. About 40 minutes later Nasir and Jamila were at one of the addresses mentioned in one of the classified ads. The guard, or perhaps the driver, asked them to wait for the lady of the house in the living room. Nasir and Jamila sat down on the rather thick carpet in the living room, waiting for the 'madam' to come in. A few minutes later, a fair-skinned and tallish woman wearing a light pink dress walked in and sat herself down on the sofa. Looking down from her perch on the sofa, she told Jamila and Nasir seated on the floor that she worked for a pharmaceutical company.

'I need a maid who will take good care of my two children. Nabeel is about 18 months old and my daughter, Dua, is six years old. You will have to manage their school uniforms, other clothes, and lunch and dinner, that is if you do get the job. Both my husband and I are very worried about their nutrition because they don't seem to eat anything.'

She said that she would not pay a paisa more than 4,500 rupees and that Jamila would have to work for about 11 hours each day. 'You will have to be here from 7 in the morning till the time I get back from office, which is about 6 in the evening.'

Nasir told the madam that he had decided to accept the offer and that Jamila would start working at the bungalow from the first day of the next month. On the way out, Jamila asked Nasir to find out more about the madam's husband from the guard. During the journey back home, Jamila kept thinking about the similarities between her situation and that of the

madam. The two women had two children each and both had to spend more than ten hours outside their homes, relying on others to take care of their children.

'How can any woman willingly work in an office, while leaving the care of her children to others? And particularly when she has everything—a great house and even a car? Maybe her husband cannot work and she has to fulfil the financial responsibility alone,' Jamila said to herself.

Later, when Jamila was serving dinner to Nasir, he asked her why she wanted to learn more about the madam's husband. 'Well, I wanted to find out why is she is forced to work. Maybe the husband is sick and cannot work?'

Nasir told her that the husband was a businessman and earned a lot. 'The guard told me that he has his own separate and bigger car. So, he is quite well-off.' When they were bedding down for the night, Nasir advised Jamila to stop thinking about others. 'It's none of our business why she is working. We should just thank God that you have a nice job now.' After a brief pause, he said, 'Some families allow their women to work so that they can keep hunger at bay. Others allow them to work so that they can buy an even bigger house. God decides who gets what, not me or you.'



## *Saturday Morning*

SADAF MASOOD AHMED

Rasheed rolled over on his bed; it was a hot and humid morning. Despite the fast-moving ceiling fan, he was perspiring heavily. Feeling very uncomfortable he got up and sat on the bed, his clothes sticking to his back. It was early morning and the sun hadn't risen fully. Rasheed was a young man, in his late-twenties; he got married early to his cousin Jameela. He had short wavy hair, muddy brown eyes, and a sharp nose. His room was small, with only one window which didn't offer a pleasant view. There was little furniture. A bed which was insufficient to hold him and Jameela, a cot in which his toddler was asleep, a mirror hung on the wall, and a cupboard with all the belongings of the household. No extra chairs to be dragged out when guests came, and nowadays guest rarely came. They all had so many problems of their own.

As he sat, he thought about the day ahead and last night when Jameela gave him the unwelcome news. Now he looked at her, his wife lying beside him but today he felt angry at her. As he looked at her, he noticed her once fair face still had the same round nose and full lips but now her complexion had faded. She was the kind who took pains in her duties, and took pleasure in them. She was used to waking up early. She was sleeping peacefully. Jameela was pregnant. All he could think about was another mouth to feed which made him a bit edgy and somewhat angry. This news was meant to make him happy. When Amjad was conceived, he was the happiest

man in the world. Laila's news was good and then Raheel's news gave him concerns but he managed. But this time it was worrying him. Another mouth to feed, he thought about those reproachful eyes which had not yet formed, looking at him, full of desires, demanding, questioning.

Finally he got up and shook Jameela awake. He went over to Raheel's crib; his toddler was still fast asleep, sucking his thumb. Rasheed gently pulled Raheel's thumb out. Raheel stirred, Rasheed whispered some soothing meaningless words, and hummed a tune. Time started dissolving in space like it always did in the morning hours. Rasheed went into the kitchen for breakfast, where he saw a *paratha* burning on the skillet.

'What are you doing?' Rasheed asked arching his eyebrows. 'What are you thinking about?' Rasheed asked another question.

'H-huh?' She asked, looking at the skillet, being caught off guard by the question.

'I asked you, what are you doing?' Rasheed said, this time a little irked. He hated repeating himself in a bad mood.

'Oh that. I was just thinking that's all.' Jameela said to her husband.

'What were you thinking?' Rasheed asked entering the kitchen. 'I was thinking that I get bored at home all day. I should look for a job, probably at a school. I would enjoy it and we can always do with some more money,' Jameela replied trying to sound convincing.

'Hmph,' Rasheed glared at her softened. He realized he had been wrong and his anger was misplaced. 'You don't have to do that, you know. I will never allow it.' He paused for few seconds and said, 'Don't worry.' These simple words had a

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soothing effect on her, she smiled and he smiled back. As he was about to leave, his daughter Laila came up to him. Laila was a four-year-old chubby little girl; she laughed a lot and had a habit of holding her belly when she laughed. She had her mother's nose and her brown eyes sparkled with innocence which Rasheed hoped she would never lose.

'Abba,' said Laila. He turned around to his daughter. It was a weekend and Rasheed knew what his daughter was going to demand.

'I will be back before you say 'Abba' he assured his daughter.

'Abba,' she said again mischievously and smiled.

Rasheed smiled back and said, 'Abba *ki jaan*, say this after the meal. I will be back,' Laila made a face, he smiled again. How peaceful they made his life, they were so special to him, he could do with another child, perhaps with some overtime at work, but he could manage. 'Where is your brother?'

'Sleeping. He will not get up until noon, he said this last night, it's the grownups' way,' revealed Laila.

He stepped out of his house, feeling pleased and satisfied. He waved at his daughter, who was still standing at the door and he knew she would stand there until he was out of sight. 'I should take them out somewhere special today, they deserve a treat once in a while,' he drifted in his serene thoughts.

'Rasheed!' he was interrupted by a voice; he knew to whom it belonged. He turned around and saw Chacha Moin gesturing towards him. Chacha Moin wasn't Rasheed's uncle by blood, just a friendly neighbour. Lines on his face showed how ancient he was, with a hunched back and hardly any teeth in his mouth, liver spots covering his face, old skin hanging from his chin. He was over a few decades into his retirement age and claimed to have seen the finest and most peaceful times



of Karachi, when people used to sleep with their front gates unlocked. Chacha Moin had been to every street in Karachi. As Rasheed moved towards him, he spotted his father besides Chacha Moin. His father was not as ancient as Chacha Moin, which was evident by the absence of a hunched back and the presence of teeth, but time had not been merciful to him marking his face with additional lines than was the demand of his age. Rasheed caught the sound of enthusiasm in their conversation. They were talking about something which was making them both equally excited and joyful.

‘Rasheed sahib, always in such a rush! Spare some of your precious time for this poor old man,’ Chacha Moin teased him.

‘Oh Chacha *jee*, I am at your service all the time, always within calling distance,’ Rasheed replied smiling. He couldn’t understand it but for some reason he was happy and couldn’t help smiling; probably his chat with Jameela and her sad face made him want to fight every hardship. She was his light.

‘Why are you leaving for work today, stay home with your family and enjoy the moment. Time is very deceptive, it will pass quickly and before you know you will be as old as I am with no entertainment and no kids to look after.’

‘I will have them both, don’t you worry,’ said Rasheed.

‘I got a call the other night from my nephew. He wants me to visit him. I refused straight away, don’t want to be away from my television in the cricket season,’ Chacha Moin turned his attention back to Rasheed’s father.

‘Cricket is the only entertainment left in our lives,’ commented Rasheed’s father.

‘But you have so many grandchildren to look after,’ replied Chacha Moin.

*'Ijazaat dijiye, Chacha jee, Abba. I am getting late,'* Rasheed knew that he wasn't needed any longer to be part of this conversation. Chacha Moin just asked him to join out of habit. He did it with every passerby. Rasheed moved towards the bus stop, he turned around to take a look at his house; Laila was rooted at the same spot. She waved to him vigorously, he waved back.

*'I didn't say good bye to Jameela,'* Rasheed thought. There is always the evening to come, to make up, and with this thought he proceeded towards his destination. Once he reached the bus stop he sensed a smaller crowd than usual. He stood waiting for the bus. When he heard the sound for the first time, it was a very loud sound, piercing his ears.

Everybody was running. Rasheed didn't know the reason. Then panic seized him, and he started running back towards his home. But before he could run more than a few steps, it hit him, tearing into his flesh. Once, twice, thrice until he lost count. His body was numbed, he couldn't hear the surrounding sounds as though he were inside a vacuum or a cylinder. There was pain, but all his senses were anesthetized; this bizarre sensation continued he tried to move his limbs, there was no power left in him. He thought about his family, his world was melting around him. A face swam into his sight; it belonged to a young man. Rasheed blinked several times to focus on the young face who was examining human bodies littered around him. Rasheed mustered all his energy, trying to call for help. He must have made some sort of sound because now he had the young man's attention. He met the young man's eyes; inside himself he was begging for help, he didn't have the strength to conjure up the words. The young man was moving towards him now, to inspect him, a crease formed on his forehead, he pointed something in his direction. Then Rasheed saw it. His scream never left his mouth as the young man pulled the trigger again.

*The Reprieve:  
No Bikini but Plenty of Attitude*

SOOFIA ISHAQUE

The jail door has opened just a crack and you hesitate before stepping outside. Is it safe to take the chance, step out, and hope for a few short hours of peace and dignity? The Blackberry is still in hand, but the pace of emails and calls from work has slowed to a trickle. You climb into your standard sedan, not paid for as yet but a work in progress like much in your life!

Getting out, escaping to the beach, is a weekly pilgrimage of noise and distraction; one that is planned days in advance with endless texts and ego-bruising banter during hurried lunch breaks or long commutes from meetings across the teeming metropolis. Who will drive on this perilous journey, make the sandwiches that meet everyone's taste or buy them at the bakery of choice. More importantly, who will work out the car seating chart that best serves everyone's interests and inclinations, singles with singles, married couples divided to keep the peace as this caravan meanders on its way to the weekly baptism.

To get to the beach one must drive over an hour in bumper to bumper traffic as buses try to crush you, and bicyclists attempt to impale themselves on shards of steel emerging at right angles from trucks bound for construction sites. In fact the entire city is really a construction site, always in flux, partially undone as each season grinds to a conclusion



without any real change. Completion dates are a fiction, pasted on boards that jeer at you, as you drive by, convincing no one. When your journey takes you through the trucking hub of Lyari, your city radars are on high alert, aware that ethnic and political wounds can manifest as blisters of crime, puncturing your pampered existence. Today it seems to be all quiet, but as you drive by unmolested you fail to notice that a Suzuki van filled with street-wise residents has eased its way behind you. The van follows at a polite distance as you pass a toll booth and head for more open spaces. Just as you reach for a coke and a sandwich, the van pulls up and blocks the road.

Your friend who is driving wisely stops, aware that any resistance will give the people in the van an excuse to open fire. Two men walk towards the car, one comes to your window and points to your hand bag, you roll down the window and pass it to him, no words are wasted during this exchange. The driver hands over his wallet and phone, he wants to ask if he can keep his SIM card but one look at his passengers' terrified faces convinces him not to make the request. The van now waves us on and one gangster even grins as if to say, this is all in good fun. We continue on our way to the beach, relieved of our money and phones but not our lives, at least not this time! One wise guy jokes that we have just paid the real toll and we all giggle as if it's the best joke we have heard this year. Nobody suggests abandoning the trip or turning back, this is a ritual that must be honoured. As the sea finally comes into murky view and you tentatively crack open a window, the acrid breeze hits you with its fumes of a sea that has been polluted by too many people and too many businesses, unregulated and unrepentant. Still you rejoice because the fabled shore is near at last. You try to see if the water is choppy, but the line of huts foils you at every turn, as straggling bushes turn into stray dogs that hurl themselves after you, barking their anger and hunger. The small roadside



huts house children just as angry and hungry. And these mini citizens hurl small rocks and abuse in many dialects at the cars that drive by. You are still rattled from the robbery so you wonder if this resentment is actually directed against you and your kind, the car owners who rule the highways, but usually you don't even notice so fixed are you on your goal.

On and on you travel, until you see the signs pointing to the magic number that designates your chosen hut, and you arrive at the blue and white shack that will be home for the next few hours of unmixed bliss. You unload the sandwiches and bakery goodies that taste all the better for not being stolen from you and gorge on them gratefully believing that there are no calories counts at the beach. Just as there is also no judgment on the shorts and tank tops you suddenly don, as if this wasn't Karachi anymore but an exotic land where this was the norm for women. To your left and right, other huts straggle on and in front an expanse of sharp, flinty rocks once again blocks your view, but you can hear the sea, breathing, its raspy sounds like that of a lifelong smoker on a calm day or the phlegmy roar that covers you with spit when it is the monsoon. Excited you change into your swimsuit, keep on the shorts and a t-shirt for modesty and run down to the small expanse of sand that divides you from the opaque depths. If you are wise you keep on your diving booties, otherwise the sharp shore stones pierce your feet as you plunge into the water and for a moment forget, that there will always be twenty pairs of eyes checking you out. As you jump up every time a wave rolls by or bask on your back in the shallows, you feel a strange, sneaking bliss creep over you. Never mind that the water probably has more petrol in it than the standard sedan you have parked next to the beach hut, or that unnamed toxins are probably being absorbed by your innocent skin, from the marvel of a nuclear power plant that shines like a five star resort in the summer evening. You still bask and tumble in the waves like

a seal or a dolphin that has lost its freedom but not its sense of wonder. Happy and waterlogged, sometimes you land up on the shore in an ungainly heap thrown by the waves and at other times emerging with all the grace of a Bond Girl, no bikini but plenty of attitude.

Then a trek back to the hut, slipping and sliding in too wet slippers that collect even more sand so that by the time you reach your destination, your feet are cocooned in a mask of wet clay, sculptural and brittle. As you wash your feet in a bucket and basin placed outside for your convenience, you are appalled by the wrinkled, grey skin that emerges from the slime. Suddenly worried about the sun and the wrinkles possibly appearing on other parts of your body, you rush inside for a chilled drink. Now for the calorie overload that the city forbids but the beach almost insists on, like a typical *desi* host. Bring on the cupcakes, the mayo-laden sandwiches, and the trans-fat filled patties bought from must eat from bakeries. As you eat and drink your fill, the sun slips into screensaver mode and you chat or stay silent as the mood takes you. Sometimes you light lanterns, or fire up the generator as lights start to twinkle all across the beach and your friends start loading up cars and making plans for the next weekend. The ritual of locking up, of putting away and of sealing off from the hungry or the curious is your last task; the stray dogs that look at you hopefully but expect a kick or an unkind word get some crusts, the baby goats greedily eat up sandwich wrappers and greasy newspapers. The *chowkidar* who expects his weekly tip to ensure that day trippers are kept away, but still maintains a dignified insouciance! What do these beach denizens think of the weekly visitors? Are we invaders despoiling their lands, or rich fools to be duped out of our hard-earned rupees?

The locals always stay dignified and silent, accepting that this is the way it has to be, this is the routine that has

brought electricity to their village, put cars in their garages and delicate gold earrings in their babies' earlobes. Did your wallets and phones pay for any of this you wonder, did men from the village hire that van and now stand ironic guard over the leftovers? Then you realize that despite the perils you will still keep coming back here, because this is all the city can offer by way of rest. Here prosperity seems to mean grills in the windows and security guards close by, yet the bars on the windows remind you that what keeps intruders out can also confine one, turning homes and offices into penitentiaries.

The thought of Monday and work chills you, more than the presence of gangsters, more than the wet hair and the damp jeans that you put on for the drive back home. The AC freezes and the music blares, as you charge into the maelstrom of bus-truck-car-bicycle-donkey cart, hoping that one robbery per trip is the norm and you can make it back unmolested. You even sing short bursts of song in the post-sun haze that has now entered your soul and the tense moments recede from your adaptable city mind. You crave the sea like a fix that will set you right for the next week of toil and turmoil, waiting till the next time you can escape just for a little while, from your own peeping Tom guards, your home with the prison-high walls and your slavish lifestyle.



## *VVIP Ride*

HASAN MANSOOR

It was supposed to be like any other Tuesday afternoon. I would report for duty exactly 30 minutes before my shift began. Say hello to my friends and exchange expletives with my supervisor. Piss off other ambulance drivers for going too slow on the roads and hear the usual sarcastic retort, 'Now, not everyone can drive as crazy as you do, Speedo sahib!' That's right, they called me Speedo, which always made my chest bulge with pride even though I knew they would say that more so out of jealousy and disgust rather than admiration, but still I thought of it as an apt compliment. After all, no one else had the unique record of never delivering a 'dead-on-arrival' patient to the hospital. But today as I sat and waited to hear the distress call over the radio inside my ambulance, I knew something was amiss. The polluted air that soaked my lungs mixed with the *nisvaar* burning my gums wasn't giving me the same kick as it always did. As I was trying to figure out whether the problem was the incensed air or my daily fix, Kazim, the coordinator, screamed over the radio. Even before he finished his message: 'Move north, Block 16, Kashmir Road, heart attack patient', I had pushed the ignition button, switched the siren on and pressed my foot down hard on the pedal. I reached ground zero in ten minutes. Everything was going according to plan. We brought the patient down on the burning steel stretcher from the fifth floor apartment. He and his four grieving relatives were loaded into my van in quick time. We were now charging down the road to the hospital. But then, we hit an unusual obstacle. His Excellency's convoy

was expected to pass by and the only road leading to the hospital was blocked. My ambulance was covered from all sides by the long queues of vehicles at a traffic light because of the VVIP movement.

‘Why are you not going forward, driver?’ screamed the patient’s desperate relative as he chewed on his thick moustache. ‘Has your ambulance gone dead?’

I thought how unpatriotic he was to ask such a silly question. ‘My ambulance isn’t dead, but I think you’re blind. Can’t you see how other patriotic Pakistanis are waiting for the safe passage of His Excellency’s car?’

The diminutive man chewed his moustache more wildly and gestured at the patient. ‘Do you see his condition?’

I stared at the patient, whose hands were crossed onto his chest.

‘Yes, I can see him. It is evident that he is more patriotic than you and is praying for the long life of His Excellency.’

‘If anything happens to him. . . .’

‘Then what?’ I asked

The man with the moustache wanted to say something, but his lips remained silent.

Beside him a tall and thin man sat who had a weepy face. He said, ‘What a pity! There is no value of human life.’

All of us, including the patient, looked at him aghast. The weepy-faced said, ‘It is the matter of a human being’s life. What a pity!’

I looked at the patient. His whole body was perspiring. His hands were on his chest and he was gazing at something on the roof of the ambulance. I saw through the windscreen

and found hundreds of cars and motorcycles surrounding the ambulance. I witnessed a similar situation in the rear view mirror. The diminutive man with thick moustache again moved from his seat and started looking at me with questioning eyes. There was something strange in his eyes, I thought. The signal in front of us had turned green, yellow, and red several times, but the traffic sergeants and constables had surrounded all the lanes of the two-way street and were informing the drivers with signs about the benefits of the breaks in their vehicles. Suddenly, I felt someone had touched my shoulders from behind. The diminutive man was still staring at me. I looked back at him with questioning eyes. He gestured at the patient, said, 'Look at him!'

I looked at the patient, who restlessly was turning from side to side on the stretcher and his eyes were stuck on the ambulance's roof.

He said, 'His condition is worsening.'

I realised that the patient's life had turned as vulnerable as Karachi's weather and its law and order situation. But I decided to reject my decades-long experience and unknowingly started to comfort myself, thinking life would ultimately triumph over death. I gazed into the diminutive man's eyes and said, 'Nothing has happened to him. He is absolutely well and sound. Don't worry!'

But he continued to stare at me. 'It is not the first time I am stuck in a traffic jam. I have taken many patients in precarious condition to hospitals and seen them return fit and healthy,' I said in an effort at consolation. 'You don't know how strong a human being is!'

The patient again writhed around and he clutched the diminutive man's arm. My experience tried to convince me that the bird was set to fly, but who knows why I comforted



myself that the patient would survive. I looked at my surroundings again but the situation remained unchanged. The ambulance was trapped by hundreds of vehicles from all sides. My hand unknowingly pressed a button and the hooter fixed on the roof of the ambulance started to cry. I poked my head around and saw the astonished drivers of cars and minibuses were staring at me. A biker beside me was wonderstruck. He said, 'I suppose you are new in the town.'

I remained silent and spotted a traffic constable scrambling towards me. The biker duly placed his helmet on his head and looked around. The constable confronted me and asked, 'Why are you in such a hurry? What's your problem?'

'I have a patient in my ambulance and his condition is precarious,' I said calmly. The constable poked his head through a window of the ambulance and saw inside. I turned too and saw the patient. He had only a few moments to survive. The constable got his head outside, said, 'He is breathing and is alive like any other prosperous citizen of Pakistan.'

I felt myself as a stone, yet I too was alive and prosperous.

'And I saw the patient too like others is praying for our leaders with his hands high towards sky,' the police officer continued. I kept staring at him like a stone.

'And look around,' he gestured towards the vehicles queuing around me, 'All these people are patriotic citizens. They all are praying for the safe passage of His Excellency's convoy.'

I remained silent. The constable angrily looked at me again. He stretched his hand inside the ambulance and turned the hooter's button off. An eerie silence had shocked the drivers nearby, who looked at us for a while and then again started waiting. The constable said, 'History is a witness that the nations who remained patient and did not remove their feet from the breaks attained the zenith of success and prospered.'

The biker nearby turned off his motorcycle. 'Bravo!' cried the constable. 'Patience makes a man and the whole economy stronger.'

'Right!' the biker said. 'I don't know about the people, but at least we can save the fuel in our vehicles.' The constable looked angrily at the biker and left. I again felt someone press my shoulders. I turned back and saw the tall and thin man crying. Looking into his eyes I did not try to confirm it with anyone whether he was crying or laughing. I knew he was crying. I saw the patient was lying still on the stretcher. Signs of utter distress had frozen on his face and the four attendants were crying. I realised the bird had flown, yet I felt utter suffocation inside me. I decided that reaching the hospital was still as urgent as it was a few moments ago.

I again turned the hooter's button on. The hooter screamed loudly and woke up all the drivers from their trance. The biker standing nearby kick-started his motorcycle and turned his head towards me. He placed the helmet on his head and then pressed his thumb to the horn button on his motorcycle.

## *The Other Side of the Bridge*

ANADIL IFTEKHAR

Holding her assignment in her hand, Sara wiped away her tears. Her assignment shone with an A-plus. Her teacher Mr Aleem, when handing her the assignment had arrogantly exclaimed that for a Nazimabadi, her flawless English was a surprise. The entire class burst into laughter. This boosted the teacher's morale. 'You are sure that this wasn't edited by Ayla?' he mocked. Despite the A-plus, he didn't bother to praise Sara's efforts. Ayla, the class snob, who couldn't read Urdu and faked her accent, was someone everyone hovered around. Including Sara, till the gorgeous diva snubbed her for being a Nazimabadi, wearing sneakers with her *shalwar kameez*, and having such a silly fashion sense.

Sara's bus reached the stop. She got off the bus and climbed onto a Qingqi rickshaw that would take her to her home on Manghopir Road in SITE Town. The bus went straight towards Nazimabad. Sara regretted lying about living in Nazimabad. She should have declared Garden as her locality. *Manghopir, what a silly name*, thought Sara.

The walk to the main road, the bus ride to university, the constant taunting of her classmates and teachers, to her parents' suspicious nature, Sara's life was stuck in a harness. Sara was in her third semester of social sciences at university. In the past one year, Sara had learned to control her classmates' taunting through her intelligent assignments. Her classmates—mostly duffers, in her opinion—relied on her notebooks and free tutoring for passing tests and



assignments. In return, Sara made sure they behaved, refusing to help those who taunted her. Zoya and Sara used to leave college together. Zoya often dropped Sara at Shahrah-e-Faisal on her way home to Karsaz. As Sara got out at the Daud Pota intersection one day, Zoya's eleven-year-old cousin innocently asked her why she had befriended such a poor girl. Zoya shot him a look that was meant to scare him. The little boy shut up.

Zoya had invited everyone to her sister's wedding. Sara only showed up at the *valima*. Although she excused herself saying that the location of the *valima* in North Nazimabad was convenient for her, Zoya knew it had a lot to do with the fact that Ayla and gang were not coming to the *valima*. She is really an empowered woman, Zoya thought admiringly, thinking that Sara's commuting on public buses just so she could get a good education was something for which she should be respected.

Ayla needed notes from Sara or else she was going to flunk the semester. She went to the library, knowing that Sara was going to be there. 'Hey Sara, nice *ajrak*! Let me guess, you are a Sindhi nationalist!' Ayla tried to break the ice between them. Sara was too dumbfounded to reply. She stared at Ayla. 'Can I have your notes?' Ayla asked.

'Yes you can have them,' Sara replied and regretted only a minute later. *Who was Ayla? The bourgeoisie? And she the proletariat? But Marx's proletariat was supposed to revolt and overthrow the bourgeoisie. I would like to revolt against this fake witch.* Her demonic thought was suppressed by her proletariat attitude of giving away her labour of her notebook to the evil capitalist. Next time she would say no to Ayla.

A few days later Zoya, Ayla, Soniya, and Faiza were snuggled in Zoya's car, as it drove to North Nazimabad.

'My love for Hardees has brought me to this village,' Ayla remarked.

'Dude, that is some serious commitment to Hardees,' Soniya replied.

After two hours and with bellies full of junk food, Zoya, Ayla, Soniya, and Faiza sat in the car. The driver, instead of turning left from the KDA roundabout, went straight.

'Uncle, why are we going this way?' asked Zoya. To their horror they were informed that a political worker had been shot dead at Meena Bazaar, which was on their route. They were at the Paposh signal when Ayla looked around, well aware that this was the neighbourhood where she had been born—a secret she kept to herself. After crossing the Paposh signal, they found themselves stranded as the cars weren't moving.

Finally, when the car started to move the driver climbed onto the bridge instead of turning left on the Liaquatabad Road. The road was blocked and stones were being pelted at cars trying to cross it. Ayla screamed that before someone shot them it would be wise to go to Sara's house.

'Yes that's we should do,' Zoya said as she dialled Sara's number. 'Sara please help us,' Zoya's plea hit her ears and crushed her dignity. *No I can't let her see my real life.* Being a Nazimabadi was a million times better than being a Manghopiran. Zoya couldn't see her house, her street laden with sewage water and hens roaming openly. 'Tell me where your house is. There are random men shooting! Before we get shot, help us!'

Sara didn't want Zoya and her driver dying because of her. *God give me a heart attack,* thought Sara. With a heavy heart, she directed Zoya to her house. After 35 minutes, Zoya reached the designated place, shocked because it wasn't

Nazimabad. There were labours working in marble shops. The roads were unpaved. Sara stood at the end of the road, waving at them. The car followed her till they reached Sara's house.

Once inside, they climbed the stairs. The lower portion belonged to the landlord. The house was clean but small and modest. Sara made them sit in the living room as her mother brought them a jug of water. When Soniya was moving forward to take the glass, Faiza slapped her, saying it wasn't boiled or filtered. Sara's mother, who was bringing home-made *samosas* to the living room, overheard the girls. She stopped right in her tracks. Sara came up behind her but from her mother's expression knew something evil must have been said. Sara walked into the living room, embarrassed at being exposed.

Soniya and Faiza were thinking what a big liar Sara was. Because Nazimabad was a cleaner area, she pretended to be a Nazimabadi. They wanted to rub it in her face but not now, while sitting in her house. Sara was famous for her short temper. If she got pissed, she would throw all of them out of her house. Zoya's driver enjoyed the plate of *samosas* served to him. *Sara lives here*. He always thought that only evil women went to universities. He held Sara in high esteem. The day passed by. The girls drank Pepsi and ate chips. Sara kept thinking apprehensively about future taunts that were to come her way. Ayla was going to tell Mr Aleem and he would mock her even more. The girls left the next morning. Each thanked their hosts for the generosity.

As the car turned the corner, Soniya went first, 'We should kick her out. What will people think, that a prestigious university like ours has such a cheap crowd?' Zoya added how hurt she was because Sara lied to her. Faiza also went ahead and said nasty things. Ayla was quiet. They kept heaping comments on Sara till the driver interrupted with a simple 'She saved your life' maxim. This shut them all up.



The next day when Sara reached the campus, she ran into her classmates. They waved at her. Ayla was sitting amongst them. *Run away*, was the first thought that came to Sara's mind. But she journeyed into the red zone.

'Hey, how are you?' asked Ayla. Sara replied casually. Her impatience was imploding. When was Ayla going to drop the bomb on her and blow her cover? The next two days passed with Sara's impatience reaching toxic levels. No one had taunted or mocked her.

'Hey Sara, here are your notes, thanks a lot!' Ayla said. Sara's heart skipped a beat. Faiza and Soniya stood behind. It was just them, Ayla would definitely say something. 'And yes, thanks for the other day, you really saved us. And since I won't be going to Hardees anymore, could you bring me their meals? I would pay you.'

'As long as you pay me, I will,' Sara replied. Ayla left the library. Sara smiled broadly.

*Flyover*

BILAL ZUBEDI

It was a balmy day announcing that winter was giving way to the new season of colour and pleasant fresh breezes. It was time for Yaqub time to go back to school after the end of the year break. He was lethargically getting dressed after taking a shower.

‘Hurry up, Yaqub *beta*, you’re getting late for your class. You have to be on time for on the first day of your new term.’

‘Amma I’m almost done and will be out in five minutes, I won’t be late.’ And there he was, shortly, all dressed up with his hair combed, already eating the breakfast placed before him; two slices of bread with strawberry jam. He looked good in his khaki coloured trousers, white shirt, and dark red tie with blue stripes on it.

This time around, Karachi had experienced a chill far longer than usual and it felt like the cold was maybe here to stay. It was time to leave for school and also buy a book Yaqub had been saving up for, for a month. His mother also hurried to get to work, but like everyday bade farewell by waiting at the door for a minute after kissing him on the cheeks only to see him go down the stairs. Yaqub’s mother worked as a receptionist in the nearby Sindhlab on Tariq Road and liked getting to work early so that she could come back early to her tiny two-bedroom residence, her home, and attend to it. Our young boy, now downstairs all the way from the third floor, set off on his daily journey to the PKM School located at a

five-minute walking distance from his flat right opposite Jheel Park behind Tariq Road. Like everyday, even today Yaqub walked by the park gazing at the greenery and the many steps one had to descend to get in. It intrigued him to go down and then come back up every morning but he never did so for fear of being late for the morning assembly at school.

His thoughts often wandered about escaping the narrow two-way road, more of a crowded lane really, immediately outside the building, with so many car workshops and framing shops on both sides. His school was the farthest he normally walked alone. The road seemed to end and take a turn to the right from where he could see the white gates of the PKM School. The mission of the day was to grab hold of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* at any cost. Yaqub had never skipped school before, and the thought and possibility of doing so engulfed him with feelings of intimidation and worry yet the painful pang of excitement running down his spine made his mind quiver.

And so he walked on the narrow strip of road that lay ahead of him away from the white gates, avoiding the eye of the old gatekeeper, taking a right from the end of the world, coming to a more spacious pathway he'd never been alone on before. Cars and taxis passed by him at a speed which made him nervous. The world seemed to be running away from him. Everything was too fast and loud because of rickshaws which left behind clouds of smoke that made it difficult to see or breathe. The world seemed a cruel place to Yaqub. But bracing himself against it, he refused to turn on his heels and instead made his way forward. Passing by all these houses, small and large, he had almost made a journey to one end of the earth only beginning to reach another, ready to face Shaheed-e-Millat Road. Yaqub was doing something so courageous, the feeling was tantamount to going around the world and coming back quicker than anybody else and



he thought about how he would boast to his friends Shahbaz and Salman once his feat was accomplished.

Amidst the clamour of vehicles and the confusion the city of Karachi created, there began to reach Yaqub's ears, not the voice of his mother Shehribano, who most certainly would have prevented him from walking further, but the loud voices of people, as if it were the roar of a crowd, as though there were chants, as he got closer.

*'Maaro, maaro, kafiron ko gaaro! Alam-e-Islam ko bachalo!* (Kill the Infidels, bury them to save the Islamic world!') Little did the boy know that they spoke of people like him! Then he saw a procession on the main road; cars jammed behind it and honking continuously, drivers yelling alongside with motorcyclists weaving their way in between cars and those marching in the procession. The procession continued moving. But where were the minibuses? They were yet to come. He had certainly not imagined Karachi to be like this. In Yaqub's confusion, there stood before him human and machine, skeleton and flesh, his reality and that of Karachi into which he wished to immerse himself.

For Yaqub, it was now like crossing the border to enter an alien territory. He couldn't be scared now after coming all this way, a little more would but give him a true feeling of this monstrous city he lived in. He had to complete his adventure to tell its tale. Otherwise, his endeavour would go to waste each part of which now gave him an inner sense of satisfaction. If robbed of his possession, it would leave his uncured curiosity like an ache in his belly. He took out his water bottle in a decisive manner to quench his thirst; as if it were war and he ought to return to the field with no supplies. Everything was now or never and he had made a spontaneous decision. He was part of it and he had to go with them.

The horde was moving and, taking advantage of his stature of a sixteen-year-old, he pushed through the crowd and made his way to the middle. What were these chants for? They seemed to be negating something and everything. The rush of a crowd and the belief that it was right overtook Yaqub, now marching in unison alongside the others not realizing the metamorphosis he had undergone. He chanted and he walked shoulder to shoulder with other men. It felt like he was reliving a scene from his history books about an episode from Partition. He was no longer there now, long consumed by the ongoing procession of moving images that was only passing by. His body was no longer his own but part of a larger one of the crowd, with one heartbeat.

There were more protestors ahead and the ones in Yaqub's group were meant to join them. They were moving downwards as this road which was on a hill, it took them from one roundabout where Yaqub joined them to the other further down. Hill Park was on the opposite side of the road. Yaqub was an iota of this beastly procession but felt like someone who knew it all. His resolve firm, Yaqub trotted along. The procession stopped and he thought they were there.

'Are we to station at the Tipu Sultan intersection?' Yaqub heard a man enquire. Is this it, he thought? Pushing through the crowd to take a look like everyone else around him made him all the more curious. To his surprise some protestors had burnt a tyre in the middle of the road and the cars were changing course, many making way to the left on to the Baloch Colony flyover. The protest for something and everything Yaqub was part of had turned violent. In front of him, they had torched a minibus and then another one; the artwork on the minibuses, which Yaqub had often enjoyed looking at, was going up in flames. With such abomination in the atmosphere and the presence of danger, he stood

flabbergasted but when the heat and stench of burning rubber from the tyre began blowing in to his face, he realized the gravity of the situation he was in. The thought of returning home resurfaced. Consciousness had returned to him, the fever of adventure disappeared when he quaked at the loud noise, ducking on the road covering his head with his arms. Yaqub felt his eardrums leak out of his ears. It was a gunshot fired into the open air by a man.

To his consternation, dangerous looking men stood around him. He felt surrounded by jackals that would prey on him any minute. Where had all these bearded men and those without them, tall and short, fat and thin with props to kill in their hands, come from? Yaqub was so insulated and oblivious of his surroundings, inebriated in his own world that he did not know the purpose of this demonstration. It seemed like all of this was planned and bound to happen exactly like this. People running around, some giving way to a stampede as blood spilled over the concrete they stood on.

'It was an open air shot, this man did it! Don't run like that!' screamed Yaqub which brought him and the bearded man, with the gun, face to face. Yaqub, after gazing in to the blood filled eyes of the devil before him, began running further towards the flyover, as did the cars earlier, to save himself from getting killed.

He was now in a chase and in the middle of the road when the devil caught hold of him, smacking him with the pistol on the head just as a cavalcade of cars with a dignitary in a large black vehicle passed by. The devil held on to Yaqub by the collar, and opened fire at the car and deposited the remaining five bullets into the dignitary. Yaqub received another blow on the head and felt a hand go down his pocket taking his belongings, his savings. He was losing consciousness. Holding his head with both hands, his vision blurred and he could hear the abrupt staccato notes of guns, shouting and screaming,



sirens and the sound of confusion. Almost fainting, he fell with a thud after being kicked by the demonstrators running wild, dislodging his right hand away from his forehead as he fought to place it there over and over again. Consequently, after a minute or two when he lifted his face marred by the dirt and filth of the road and that of the people, he saw his own blood from his forehead on his hands. It was dripping all the way down from his face and neck on to his shoulders.

The metallic taste of blood on his lips and the gruesome reality in which he struggled to regain his ground, met with additional blows from the wild animals running havoc. With both hands and knees on the road, Yaqub struggled to gain his balance and tried to stand. Hurt and weak, he got up with his left palm holding the back of his head. There lay something on the back of his head, soft and tender yet like nothing he had felt before, producing a cold sensation on the scalp. It felt heavy. He removed it to see meat, as if of a mammal, only to see flesh dripping in blood, human flesh with even more lying on the road behind him: parts of bodies covered in blood lying everywhere. And people, those alive on the run. There had been an explosion after the murder. Yaqub's schoolbag was gone.

With the piece of flesh, perhaps that of the public figure killed before his eyes, still in his hands, Yaqub turned the other way to look towards the flyover; his route to escape, to freedom from this asphyxiating time. He began to run up the road on the flyover toward that small boundary wall he saw. It was the wall of the flyover and he ran taking in cold air which made it difficult to breathe, accompanied by nausea and a slight headache. Just then a man taller than Yaqub tried to push him aside causing him not to fall but plunging his face into flesh that lay stuck to his left hand, masking his face with the flesh of a dead man. Screaming and sobbing, Yaqub gasped while pushing it away but could not stop running,

his heart pounding violently on the verge of bursting out of his chest at any minute. He imagined the roar of the crowd coming towards him from behind growing louder but couldn't hear anything as he ran on the flyover trying to get away; the silhouette of a woman dwindling in the scorching heat calling and shouting out to him in despair. Delirious, the background fading away and the noises all now a distant cry, he felt as though his being rose to nothingness. Yaqub jumped off.

## *The Miracle*

FEHMIDA RAUFI

One Sunday, we hired a coach and all of us, including Asma and Uzma who were Malku's sisters, and her brothers, aunts, and uncles, snuggled into the coach. We took a left turn from SITE area on to the Hub River Road and our fascinating journey started. It was a long winding road with rocky hills on either side. The journey seemed endless until we finally arrived at Manghopir. It was a small village inhabited by Makranis, who were selling dates and mats made from leaves of date trees. With awe we watched the green dome of the shrine of Pir Mangho. There were long and wide staircase leading up to the front door of the tomb and the most fascinating thing was that small wooden cradles were hanging on each step. I discovered that those couples who wanted children would hang these cradles and pray, through Pir Mangho, that God would bless them with a child. Anisa took out a small cradle from one of the bags she was carrying and hung it on the string of one of the steps. Malku and her mother climbed up those stairs while the rest of us went to see the crocodiles. We went up to the wall and looked below; there were about hundred crocodiles there. They gave me the creeps. Some were really huge, some were babies, and some looked old and unable to move. A few of them had their mouths open showing their pale yellow teeth. I think it was their feeding time because only one man, the keeper of the crocodiles, went up to the edge of the pond, and as soon as he arrived, all the crocodiles started moving towards him. It was quite a sight, slimy green water splashing everywhere, and



they made such a terrible and frightening noise that I wanted to move away but Asma held my hand tightly. The keeper had a bucket full of large pieces of meat. The crocodiles seemed hungry and were snapping at each other, but no one moved towards the meat which the keeper had kept at the end of a long stick. Soon there were ripples in the pond, all the crocodile became still and a very large crocodile appeared, the rest of the crocodiles moved away to give him way, the large one had a smear of red colour on his forehead, he was known as Mor Mubarak, the king of the crocodiles. The keeper fed him first, and after he had eaten the other crocodiles began their feast. It was getting late so we moved towards the hot springs of sulphur. The place near the hot spring seemed quite dirty and unhygienic, so we didn't feel like staying there very long. It is said that these springs have medicinal qualities and people with skin disease often bathe there to cure themselves. It was soon *maghrib* time and we prepared to return. Malku seemed lost and withdrawn and sat quietly all the way home and I kept wondering what had happened to her.

That night I couldn't sleep thinking about Malku and her husband, and her Cinderella-like 'from rags to riches' life. Malku was my sister's friend. When I first became aware of her, she was about fifteen and I was about eight, and I thought she was the most beautiful girl on earth. Malku was very nice to me, she would often pinch my cheeks with affection and ask me about school and studies. I felt nice when she gave me so much attention. But I still remember it was a Friday, we were back early from school, when we heard the adults whispering that Gullo Bhai, Malku's father, had been arrested. The police had come to their home and handcuffed him and taken him away to prison. My Abu who had always kept to himself, told Ammi to be kind to Malku as her family was going through a bad time. Since then Malku had become a regular guest at our home for lunch, dinner, and tea. Soon we heard that Gullo bhai was back and had

plenty of money to spare. Malku started donning new clothes, plenty of artificial jewellery, and new shoes.

After Intermediate, my sister enrolled into Dow Medical College and got busy in her studies and did not have much time for Malku, who had also cleared Intermediate and was looking for a job. Her father had disappeared again. I believe he was in some kind of illegal business and was often in and out of prison. Malku was left to fend for her younger brothers and sisters. Her first job was that of a telephone operator at a large firm, where many men were mesmerized by her beauty and wanted to marry her, but would leave her when Malku's father would approach them, asking for money, because being a gambler he was always in debt. Whenever Malku's father's reputation reached her office, she would have to leave her job and look for another. And so, poor Malku left one job after another. While she was working at PICIC Bank, she met her heartthrob Saeed, an industrialist from Lahore, extremely elegant, good looking, very rich, and belonging to a very respectable Punjabi family. It was a whirlwind affair and just four days later Saeed and Malku got married. Saeed was in too much of a hurry to get married. His family arrived from Lahore. I saw rich elegance from close quarters, Banarasi saris, expensive jewellery, and a high and mighty attitude. After the *nikah*, Malku left with her husband in their beautiful expensive car. Many people predicted that this marriage would not last long, Saeed would leave her: rich people have their own way of having fun, but seeing them happy together, we were all proved wrong. Little did we know that although for us the criterion for happiness was money, but was Malku really happy? I came to know about it when my sister returned from Nigeria a year later. My father had died and we were in a dire financial crisis. My sister, after completing her MBBS, had got a job in Nigeria and I had completed my Intermediate. My sister told me a strange and unbelievable story about Malku. Malku reached Lahore the



same night she was married, the next day she noticed that people came from far and wide just to see her. They looked at her in a strange way, a few of them giggled, hiding their faces behind their *dupattas*, and the whole day she wondered why. What was wrong? Saeed ignored her questions.

Finally, night came and they were alone in their room and Saeed told Malku his secret. For the first nine years of his life he was brought up like a girl, wearing girls' clothes, and considered himself a girl. Then it was discovered that he was a boy. Poor Saeed lived with this pain for years; no one in Lahore would marry him, since his family were well known industrialists. Wherever they sent the *rishta*, the girl-boy issue would come up. Malku was stunned. Aghast, she had felt she had been cheated, she was disgusted, and cried throughout the night, all this time Saeed begged her that he loved her, and would keep her happy. He would provide all the comforts of life for her and her family, and even provide a job for Hashim, Malku's brother. He promised that he would provide a good dowry for her sister Najma. Saeed asked her to think it over and if she still wanted to go back to Karachi, he would let her go. After having cried all night, sanity prevailed in the early hours of dawn, she started thinking about her family. If she went back home, it might become difficult for her other sisters to get married, divorce being a taboo in her family. Then she thought of her father, a drunkard and a gambler who had made life hell for everyone. No it was not possible for her to go back home and so she decided to keep up the pretence of marriage, but for how long? She was only twenty-two whereas Saeed was thirty three. She became the butt of everyone's jokes, the men in the family made passes at her, trying to corner her, and at times it was difficult to ward them off and resist them. Moreover, living in that aristocratic home was difficult, how to dress in a sophisticated way, how to greet guests, what topics of conversation to avoid, which fork and spoon to use, not to slap her thighs while laughing



when she found anything funny, and most of all, not to say '*dey taali*' while talking. Life was becoming unbearably stressful and then she suffered a massive nervous breakdown. She came to Karachi, Malku's family were not very educated and thought that either she was possessed by a jinn or that somebody had cast an evil eye on her. Anisa thought that if Malku had a child she would be well and happy. Since Anisa had placed a cradle at Manghopir's shrine she was sure that Malku would now conceive and would be in a better frame of mind, but Malku's condition became worse. She was now withdrawn and just stared into space. Anisa finally took Malku to see a doctor. After six weeks, Malku was completely cured. Soon after that, Saeed and Malku went on a holiday to Switzerland and Malku disappeared from our lives. She returned to Karachi after four months with the news that she was pregnant—through artificial insemination; that's what my sister told me later. She was glowing with happiness, and looked even prettier.

When Malku's daughter Alishba was born, Anisa's happiness knew no bounds. She distributed *gulab jamans* in the entire neighbourhood, including Chacha Aleem who owned a grocery shop at the corner, the *dhobi*, and even the sweeper. She went to place a *chaadar* of flowers at Manghopir and even gave two kilograms of meat to the crocodiles. She was convinced that the miracle happened due to Pir Mangho's prayers.

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## *Tea or Coffee?*

FIZZA HASAN

Mrs Sherazi's sharp eyes took in the well-manicured lawn and the neat edges of flower beds filled with blooming shrubs in the garden of the large, white-pillared, fashionable house in a posh residential district of Karachi.

'Hmmm, new gardener,' she thought. 'Not bad. Must do something about my garden too! I wonder what she pays him.' A babble of female voices met Mrs Sherazi's ears as a uniformed servant opened the front door for her, and she entered the house. 'Good,' thought the lady who loved to make an entrance. 'Almost everyone seems to be here.'

She paused in the doorway, her ample figure taking up most of the space, and adjusted her *dupatta* on her shoulders, so that the expensive embroidery on her *kameez* would show to an advantage.

'Mrs Sherazi!' shrieked a flabby pale-skinned woman seated near the door. 'There you are! Late as usual!'

'I'm so terribly sorry, Mrs Khan! I really wanted to be here on time, but you see I got held up. The most awful thing has happened!' The last sentence had the desired effect. Mrs Sherazi knew that the whole room was listening, even the women who were pointedly looking the other way and still talking amongst themselves.

'Why Mrs Sherazi, what has happened?'

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'Why Mrs Sherazi, what has happened?'

‘You all know my second cousin Sofia, don’t you? Well, dacoits broke into her house the day before yesterday!’ Having assured herself the full attention of everyone in the drawing room, Mrs Sherazi sank down onto a flower-patterned sofa piled high with soft cushions and laid her trendy sunglasses next to a crystal vase on the glass-topped coffee table.

‘No! Really? What happened? Is the family all right?’ Mrs Khan’s tremulous voice was all concern. Everyone was listening intently. Casting a glance around and satisfied that indeed she had everyone’s undivided attention, Mrs Sherazi started her tale. ‘Well, Sofia is still in shock—naturally and understandable, of course. Nobody was hurt, thank God, but they took everything—all the electronics, you know Sofia’s husband always has the latest of everything! Her jewellery’s worth a couple of million, you know, her new car, everything! Gone! They were in the house for three hours. Held the whole family at gunpoint! The children were really terrified! Such a loss!’

‘They’re very lucky to have escaped unhurt,’ put in Mrs Husain. ‘I know somebody who lost her husband in a robbery of the same kind. Shot him through the head as they left!’

‘Well, anyway,’ Mrs Sherazi, who obviously didn’t like the shift in attention, butted in. ‘Sofia’s completely broken, taken to her bed. The doctor’s prescribed a long list of tranquilisers. Her husband says they’re all just a bunch of fancy names, and are of no use at all. And that she should snap out of it and attend to the children’s needs. Very unfeeling, I must say. He is rather cold, actually. Runs in his family. My parents knew his uncle. I, for one, know I would be *devastated* if anything like that happened to me!’

‘What? You would be devastated if being cold ran in your family?’ There were a few snickers at Mrs Husain’s politely made remark.



Mrs Sherazi's glare would have reduced any of the other women in the room to nothingness. 'Yes, well, not everyone has the *sensitivity* to be able to feel loss and pain. Some people just don't have it in them, you know!' Having put Mrs Husain in her place, or so she thought, Mrs Sherazi turned to her hostess and different conversations started up all over the room once again, mostly centred around the latest summer clothes exhibitions. 'Oh, Mrs Khan, I've just noticed—you've got new curtains! They're very nice, I'm sure, but pity that they don't quite match the sofas!'

'Did I tell you? That big shop Jewel Palace is offering a ten per cent discount on all jewellery this week. I thought I should get a few things for my daughter. I know she's only seventeen and might not get married for some years, but time flies and it will be so hard buying everything just before her wedding.'

'I must go and see. I've been thinking of getting some new gold bangles for a while now. I'm sick of these old ones, so out of fashion now. Don't you just get tired of old jewellery after a while, Mrs Sherazi?' At this point, two glass trolleys, set with delicate crockery and silver and loaded with delicacies, were wheeled in and the maid started serving spicy kebabs, light sandwiches and cream cake. Mrs Khan prepared to pour the tea.

'Mrs Khan, nobody can make kebabs quite like your cook. And this chutney is sublime!' One of the ladies remarked appreciatively. Several others agreed.

'You have no idea how difficult it is to prevent my cook from leaving. Whenever he wants his salary raised, he threatens to go, and I have to agree to his terms because I just can't afford to lose him. What with all the official dinners my husband has to give, I really need a good staff. And he knows some really good recipes.'

A discussion about recipes ensued, the ladies all trying to outdo one another in originality. The exchange was at its peak when the door opened and the maid showed in another visitor. The plump well-dressed woman who entered had turned very white even with all her make-up. The soft manicured hand that clutched a smart leather purse trembled. Her eyes were wide with shock and glazed with fear.

The hostess got up to greet her. 'Mrs Nawaz, you're late! That's not at all like you! But I'm so glad you were able to come.' Mrs Khan went forward and kissed the air next to her visitor's rouged cheek. On not receiving any kind of response, she noticed that something was wrong. 'Mrs Nawaz, are you all right? Do come and sit down.' Mrs Husain hastily vacated a nearby chair and Mrs Nawaz was led to it. Mrs Khan called for some iced water.

Mrs Nawaz looked vacantly around her. 'They had a gun. Two guns,' she whispered flatly. 'They took my car! Pointed one at my head! They were going to shoot!'

Some of the women gasped. Mrs Husain gently took her cold hands. 'Mrs Nawaz, could you tell us what has happened?'

'Oh for goodness' sake woman, snap out of it! Enough of the theatrics!' the loud voice of Mrs Sherazi broke in.

'Mrs Sherazi, please! The lady is in shock. Could you stay out of this?'

Mrs Nawaz gulped down some water with trembling hands. 'There were three of them, waiting behind a tree. I parked my car and got out and they came. Put a gun to my head!' She shuddered violently and gave a loud shrieking wail. 'My car! My new car! My new Toyota! Oh what will I do?'

A buzz went through the group of women; there were expressions of sympathy, fear, practical advice.

‘Have you informed anyone? The police? Your husband?’

Another wail. ‘I can’t! Oh I can’t! He’ll kill me! He’ll be so angry! He told me not to take the new car, but I did so want to show it to everyone!’

‘Give me the number, I’ll call him. It must be done immediately.’

‘Oh Mrs Husain, would you? Oh my new car! Oh what will I do?’

Mrs Husain left the room to make the phone call and the women started settling down. A couple of them tried to comfort the now sobbing Mrs Nawaz. Mrs Sherazi’s entrance had been trumped. The large, over-decorated room started buzzing with conversation again.

After having plied Mrs Nawaz with a box of perfumed tissues, Mrs Khan fluttered back to her trolleys. ‘Mrs Nawaz,’ she trilled, ‘how about some cream cake? It will make you feel better. It’s very good, from the new bakery on the main street. And would you prefer tea or coffee? And you, Mrs Sherazi? Tea or coffee?’



## *The Dream*

MUHAMMAD OMAR IFTIKHAR

‘Here you go sir!’ Mushtaq places the burger on the plastic table for his customer. He turns swiftly to his stove and prepares more burgers. It’s almost noon as throngs of customers make their way to Burger Point during lunch hours. It is small shop in a lane where other eateries are also situated. These types of burger shops are a common sight in Karachi, and Mushtaq’s Burger Point is one of them. His shop is located adjacent to the Baloch Colony flyover on Shahrah-e-Faisal. Mushtaq is sixteen and first started working at the Burger Point when he was twelve. His father is a school bus driver who owns the Burger Point. Mushtaq’s mother sews clothes for people in the neighbourhood. He has a sister who is ten years younger than him. He lives in a small two-room house in the vicinity of Baloch Colony. Every day is a challenge for him. From eleven in the morning till three in the afternoon he prepares and sells burgers. His father purchased the Burger Point six years ago and managed it by himself but when he got an opportunity to drive the school bus he asked Mushtaq to step in. His father returns to take charge of the Burger Point at half past one in the afternoon. Then Mushtaq leaves for home to have his lunch and go to his school where he studies in class nine in the afternoon shift. Arsalan is Mushtaq’s only friend. They have been classmates for four years and live in the same neighbourhood.

One evening Mushtaq returned home looking depressed. ‘Son! What’s the matter? Did Asghar bully you again?’ asked

his mother. Asghar studied in Mushtaq's school and bullied him almost every day.

'Mother, will we always remain poor?' Mushtaq's mother was shocked to hear his question.

'Why did you ask that?' she inquired.

'Mother,' Mushtaq continued. 'Asghar said that his father has bought a new motorcycle and he said that we are poor and we will never have money. We don't have a motorcycle, and that is why he is rich.'

'Don't pay any attention to what Asghar says. His father spent six months in jail for stealing. We don't have a motorcycle but we have each other and your father earns an honest income. Now don't you worry about Asghar. You change your clothes; I'll give you something to eat.'

Mushtaq and his family lived in a rented home. The expenses were way more than the monthly income. Living hand to mouth had made Mushtaq want to do something big in life, something that would put his family out of this predicament. His father had plans to purchase another shop but Mushtaq opposed his decision. One night the two had a quarrel on the same topic.

'Why don't you want me to open another Burger Point?' asked his father.

'Because it won't do us any good. We will only double our earnings and not multiply them. And after all father, I am not going to sell burgers all my life.'

'What?' Mushtaq's father was perplexed. 'Why do you say that? It's our family business.'

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‘Father,’ Mushtaq tried to explain. ‘I want to do something big. I know I can do something that people can only dream of.’

His father stared at him with rage and slapped him. ‘Stop with your nonsense! ‘I will do something big’ . . . huh!’ Mushtaq’s father said in utter frustration and left the room.

Mushtaq was weeping. His mother hugged him, wiped his tears and said, ‘Son, you will always do what you dream of. Now you go to sleep.’

The next afternoon, Mushtaq didn’t feel like studying so he went to his uncle’s home. In response to the knock on the scruffy wooden door, came an old voice, ‘Who is it?’

‘Karamdin Chacha, it’s me, Mushtaq,’ he said politely.

‘Oh ho ho!’ Karamdin Chacha opened the door with excitement and welcomed Mushtaq warmly. ‘How are you, my child?’

‘I’m good, Chacha. How are you?’

‘I’m as usual, son! Old and rusty!’ Karamdin Chacha said as he sat on his chair. Chacha lived alone. He didn’t have children and his wife passed away two years ago. Chacha made kites and sold them to neighbourhood children. His room was filled with kites. Mushtaq kept staring at them and was lost in a world of his own.

There was a big hole in the wall that gave way to a view of the sky. Mushtaq got a crazy idea while sitting in a room filled with kites. He asked, ‘Karamdin Chacha, do you think if someone has a big dream, he can accomplish it?’ Chacha replied, ‘A dream is a dream. It will always remain a dream until you take action in making it a reality.’

Chacha paused and asked, ‘Do you have a dream?’

‘Yes I have a dream.’

Chacha looked at him and said, ‘My child, no matter how big your dream is, no matter how insignificant it looks to others, your dream is your responsibility. Your effort, your faith in God and self-belief will give you your moment of glory.’

The next day, Mushtaq kept pondering about his big idea and made a lot of blunders while working at Burger Point. One customer ordered an egg burger and he made him a beef burger. One customer asked not to put ketchup in and he added ketchup. A few annoyed customers complained to his father.

‘What has happened to you lately?’ Mushtaq’s father scolded him. ‘You seem to have lost interest in your work!’

But Mushtaq stood silently. A few days later at school Mushtaq was attending his Urdu class. He was sitting in the last row instead of the front row that was his usual place. The teacher was reading Allama Iqbal’s poetry. Mushtaq was listening while making a sketch on a piece of paper.

Hearing the words of the poem renewed Mushtaq’s energy from within. His pencil began moving with vigour. Just then, Asghar leaped from behind and snatched the paper.

‘Give it back!’ Mushtaq demanded. The teacher was busy writing on the blackboard so he couldn’t see the commotion at the back. Asghar started ridiculing the sketch that was of a long horizontal rectangle with lots of horizontal and vertical lines inside.

The teacher turned around and shouted: ‘What the hell is going on back there?’ The teacher saw Asghar holding the sketch in his hand. ‘What’s this?’

‘Nothing, sir!’ Asghar replied.

‘Show it to me!’ the teacher shouted. ‘What is this?’

‘Sir . . . th- th- this is a bui- bui- building,’ Mushtaq was panicky.

‘What building?’ the teacher asked. ‘You’re drawing pathetic buildings and not paying attention in the class.’

Mushtaq was so nervous he said, ‘Sir, this is my hotel!’ Laughter echoed in the classroom as all eyes stared down at Mushtaq.

‘Quiet!’ shouted the teacher as he crumbled the paper and threw it in the dustbin. ‘Dream what you can do, not what is impossible!’ the teacher said and walked towards the blackboard.

Mushtaq used his new found energy and said: ‘You’re a hypocrite!’

‘What?’ the teacher glared at Mushtaq. ‘What did you just say?’

‘Yes, sir!’ Mushtaq continued. ‘You are teaching Iqbal’s poetry about going beyond the ordinary and then you ask me not to go after the impossible.’ Mushtaq said with teary eyes, trembling feet, and a heavy voice.

‘How dare you question me like that?’ the teacher slapped Mushtaq. The cracking sound ricocheted against the walls. ‘I have seen people like you,’ the teacher said. ‘You are making a hotel in your dreams. Understand your own worth young man! And you dare to question my teaching methods? You are a student and I am your teacher. You are small and I am big. You are wrong and I am right! Now sit down and pay attention to what I say!’

Later that day Mushtaq didn’t feel like going home, so he thought of meeting Karamdin Chacha. As Mushtaq came



closer to Chacha's home he froze. Asghar just emerged from a narrow lane and was standing in front of him. Mushtaq thought he would bully him but was surprised to see Asghar smiling.

'I thought you were going back home. I wanted to talk to you so I followed you here,' said Asghar. He moved towards Mushtaq and took out from his pocket the same crumbled piece of paper that was the reason for Mushtaq's humiliation in the class. 'I took it out for you,' Asghar said as he handed over the paper to Mushtaq.

'But why?' Mushtaq was curious.

'You want to know why?' Asghar continued. 'One day, I was having tea at the corner *dhaba* (teashop) and the television at the *dhaba* was showing one of those channels that describe how men in other countries construct great buildings. In Dubai they have built a very tall hotel.' He paused and said, 'Yours will be higher than that.'

Mushtaq was speechless. Asghar placed his hand over Mushtaq's shoulder and said, 'You remember when I insulted you for being poor? I was wrong. We all are poor, because we do not have something big to do in life. But Mushtaq, you are richer than anyone who has ever been born in Baloch Colony. You are richer than any person born in a shabby home with no clean drinking water and no fresh food to eat. You know why? Because you have a dream! And today, when you confronted the teacher, I felt happy that you stood up for what you believe in. I am ashamed that I have been hurting you for such a long time. Please forgive me, Mushtaq.' Tears ran down Asghar's eyes.

Eight years have passed. Mushtaq completed his Intermediate, cleared his Bachelors and was at the edge of earning his Masters degree, all thanks to the small Internet Café business

he started after his father sold Burger Point and gave him the money.

For Mushtaq, his dream is a tough challenge. But he is living his dream every day. His pencil sketch is still pasted on the wall. He is motivated to see it every morning. His mother was the first to endorse his dream by placing her thumb print on it. He doesn't know when he will build his hotel but his parents and Karamdin Chacha believe in him. Mushtaq knows in his heart that it will take a long time, but a day will come when he will hang the real photograph of his hotel in his room.

## *The Unknown Man*

RAIYA MASROOR HASHMI

He passed through the automatic exit doors of the arrival lounge at Jinnah International Airport, stepped out into the humid Karachi air, and was almost blinded by the fog that condensed on his glasses. The unexpected temporary blindness coupled with the hot humid air suffocated him, making him feel as if the air itself was trying to choke him. Maybe the air hides secrets, he thought. Maybe it remembers things from each and every place it has ever passed. The mist on his glasses and the choking humidity were a silent reminder that even after ten years, this city had neither forgotten nor forgiven him.

As he neared the taxi stand, he was surrounded by taxi drivers, all eager to charge naïve international passengers with exorbitant fares.

‘*Bhai* sahib, where do you want to go?’ a potbellied taxi driver asked. His lips were a dark shade of red due to the betel leaves rolling in his mouth. Before he could reply, another driver, a bold Pakhtun with grey eyes, moved towards him.

‘Let me take your luggage, sahib,’ he offered, extending his hands to take the strap of the small handbag off his shoulder.

‘Can you take me to Qasba Colony?’ he asked the Pakhtun. The Pakhtun’s extended hands jerked back as he shook his head and stepped back. ‘No sahib, we don’t go there.’

‘Why not? I will pay you double.’



‘No sahib, it’s not safe. They kill us.’

Taking advantage of the situation, the potbellied driver moved forward. ‘*Bhai* sahib, let me take you. . . .’

‘You know I want to go to Qasba Colony,’ he repeated in case the driver had not properly heard his exchange with the previous driver.

‘You will pay double right?’ the driver inquired, putting his handbag on the backseat and opening the front passenger door for him. ‘Let’s go then. Life and death are in Allah’s hands. We can’t stop living.’

As the taxi shifted into gear, he leaned back his head on the headrest. Scared that the familiar landmarks might bring back old memories he closed his eyes, blocking out the city. It wasn’t hard for him to locate the exact alley and house after reaching Qasba Colony. In this part of the city, the roads—rough and unmade—were still dotted with potholes. Bullet marks, remnants of the frequent shootings that often took place in this area, and graffiti, depicting political party slogans, covered almost all the walls.

He was greeted by a pungent odour as he stepped out of the taxi. The smell of the incinerating garbage coupled with the stench of the overflowing drains that had left sewage on most parts of the road made him nauseous. Ignoring the curious stares of the residents he moved towards the house which he clearly remembered. This house was located on what was now called Kati Pahari: the most dangerous border of one of the greatest ethnic divides of the city: the Pakhtuns and the Muhajirs. The rival groups fought with each other continuously killing many innocent people in the process. Right now he was standing in the Pakhtun division. Being a Muhajir, it was a really dangerous feat. A bullet could come

from anywhere and kill him. The small iron door clanged as his fist hit the cold hard metal.

'Who is it?' a woman's voice was clearly audible from behind the thin sheet of iron.

'Err . . .' for a moment his mind went completely blank at the prospect of coming face to face with the woman behind the door. The door opened a little and an eye peered from the small slit between the door and the wall. 'Who is it?' he could now detect fear in her voice.

'Ummm . . . I have got some information about your husband.' He had prepared for this moment all through his journey but he had never imagined the panicked nervousness he was feeling now.

'My husband?' The door opened inwards and the surprised face of a skinny Pakhtun woman materialized. Completely wrapped in her *dupatta*, she looked at him with suspicion in her green eyes.

'Can I come in?' he asked.

'No!' she said bluntly. This guarded rudeness was probably normal behaviour for people who lived in constant fear.

'I am your husband's friend. He had given me some money to keep for him. I have come to return it.'

She hesitated for a while trying to make up her mind whether to let in a Muhajir or not. After he was cleared by her intuitive security assessment, she said 'Come in', opening the door completely and stepping aside to let him in. It was a very small house. She motioned him to sit on the only piece of furniture in the small enclosure: an iron charpoy.

'So he really was with the party then?' she asked standing across from him.

'Ji?' he asked, confused.

'I always thought that he must have worked with the party in secret that's why he was killed so brutally,' her eyes filled with tears. 'I begged them . . . begged them to leave him alone. I even told them I was expecting and to have mercy on me but they took him away, and his mutilated body . . . two days later . . .' her sentences broke as she choked back tears.

'I am . . .' he couldn't even say sorry. The air was choking him again. It remembered. It remembered everything. 'Just take this money. It's your husband's,' he started to get up. He wanted to get out. Suddenly a young boy carrying a pack of tissue boxes entered through the open door. He ran to the woman and gave her some cash from his pocket.

'Is this enough Amma or should I go back again? I could sell more but it's too hot at the traffic signal and I am hungry. What's for—?' Sensing eyes on him he turned and noticed the stranger in his house. His eyes filled with fear. A Muhajir standing in a Pakthun house in this area was not good news.

'It's all right Hussain. He is your father's friend,' the mother explained to the terrified boy.

'Really?' The boy's eyes lit up with joy. 'Was he really a rickshaw driver? Rickshaws make so much money. Amma says if he was alive, I wouldn't have had to sell tissue paper.'

He couldn't hear any more of this. He left the money envelope on the charpoy and ran out as fast as his legs could carry him. His next stop was a little easier. As soon as the door opened, he told the old man at the door that he was from a TV channel and the door was opened all the way to let him in. There was a narrow staircase terminating into a room right at the top. He ascended the stairs, led by the man. The room at the top smelled of urine and old bed sheets. There



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was a charpoy against the wall upon which a young man was lying face up.

‘Here he is, Abdul Bari, my brave son,’ the old man introduced him to the boy.

‘Baba, I don’t want to meet anyone,’ the boy turned away his face.

‘I have brought some money for his treatment. I saw him on the morning show,’ he started.

‘What treatment?’ the old man cut in. ‘After Bari’s interview on TV, several people came to offer help. But the doctors have confirmed there is no way he can walk. Do you hear? Nothing can help my son. He has lost both his legs.’

‘Baba! Baba, stop! Make him go away!’ the boy on the charpoy bellowed.

‘He was just a ten-year-old schoolboy coming home from school. What had he done to be shot like this?’

‘Babaaaaaa! I don’t want to remember,’ the young boy had started sobbing.

‘Both his legs have been amputated. Do you know in the past ten years he has not left the confines of this room for a single day? Do you know that I am feeding, clothing, and bathing him at this age when he should have been doing the same things for me? What did he do to deserve this? What did I do to deserve this?’ The man rested his head on the side of the charpoy and started sobbing. ‘Give your money to someone else. We are happy the way we are, but I have not forgiven the bastards who did this. I pray every single day that they go through the same pain.’

He was suffocating again. It was hot. The city was angry. Angry at him. He left the man crying, descended the stairs,

and ran outside. He wished he could tell the old man that his prayers had been answered. The killer was suffering a pain worse than his.

When the cops had brought his son's bludgeoned body to his house, killed in a hate crime in London, he had immediately realized what had happened. Years ago, he was a resident of Karachi. Growing in an impoverished neighbourhood with no education, the prospect of earning money through mugging and snatching had felt so thrilling at the time. It was revenge against the rich. After some years, he joined a local gang and there was no turning back. In no time, he had become the unknown man behind the local shootings killing innocent people, the faceless man behind the bomb blasts; the unidentified man behind the burnt buses, tortured bodies, and target killings. After successfully carrying out a high-profile assassination, he had been sent to London with a new identity.

What did he think? That his money could wash away his sins? He was wrong. He could never alleviate their pain even with all the money in the world. The air still remembered and it was suffocating him.

There was only one way to end this suffocation: to become the unknown man again, for one last time.

*'An unknown man was hit by an oncoming train at about 10:20 p.m. on Sunday at the Malir crossing under a closed level-crossing gate.'*



## *Cultural Heritage*

MAZHAR ALI NANJIANI

He was living in San José, a short distance from San Francisco; studying for his MS in computers. He was also working in a department store, not that he needed the money but to be able to make new acquaintances so that he could get citizenship of the country. She was a co-worker, slightly older than him though she didn't look it. He expressed his wishes and plans. She agreed to get married and a year or so after he got his blue passport, they agreed they would quietly say good-bye and go on their own separate ways. Everything went exactly as planned. Then he got a call from home: his younger sister was getting married. His wife wanted to see his home country. His family knew about his marriage and the agreement he had with his so-called wife. Taking her along would be a novelty and exciting for the family: to have a foreigner as a guest in the house on such a cheerful occasion. His family lived in a huge mansion in Defence in Karachi. The family was rather large—brothers, sisters, cousins, uncles, lots of small children living together with lots of servants and even a few pets in the house.

Her visit to Pakistan was enjoyable, entertaining, and far more than she expected both for her and her in-laws. She mingled freely with everyone, especially with her mother-in-law, an elderly lady. When it was time for them to return to the States, she refused to leave. The pleasure of a large family being together made it enjoyable and fascinating, for it reminded her of get-togethers back home in San José at the

time of Thanksgiving. Like when the whole *khandaan*, got together for a ceremonial preparation and cooking of (green) garlic, along with all its supportive items of *dahi*, *aloo baighan ka bhurta*, *paapars* (papadams) etc., to celebrate and welcome the cooler temperatures of winter. She even had her nose pierced while on one of the shopping sprees along Zaib-un-Nisa Street with the girls of the house, and she had received quite a lot of gifts of jewellery and clothes, which she was very fond of wearing, from the in-laws of her husband's sister. The glass bangles on her arms and the silvery *pazaibs* on her ankles, made an attractive tinkling sound as she scampered around the whole house.

She exclaimed, 'I don't mind if you live here in Pakistan or in the States, but I am not leaving you. He reminded her of their agreement but she refused to abide by it. Instead she said that if now he left her, then it would be his last day of possessing a green card. 'I love your country,' she declared. 'I love your culture, your way of living, it's unique, it's exciting. I love your family, your mother, my mother that is . . . and I love you now!' With this she turned towards her mother-in-law, who opened her arms, with a strong, genuine and confident smile. She glided towards her and rested her head on her shoulder, felt her two arms, old but strong, pressing around her, and received such a warm hug with a deep sigh of love, affection, satisfaction, and security, she looked at her poor husband who stood in the corner of the room, speechless, unable to think of anything.

## *A Bit of Blue Sky*

SABAHAT-E-ZEHRA

I stepped inside the police station. Officer Rasheed was standing there. I could see something in his hand. Whatever it was it brought hope to me. Hope that I would find my son today. Hope that I didn't have to look for him after today. Hope that we would live a happy life once again with such loving people around us to help us when we need it. I stepped towards the officer as he smiled at me. It was a smile of pity. He pitied me. Everyone there did. I could tell by their faces that they all felt sorry for me. Well let's hope they don't have to any longer. Let's hope this time I leave the police station with happiness and with hope to find Bilal. Officer Rasheed handed me an envelope. I opened it and found a picture there. I was disappointed once again.

"That's not my son!" I shouted at Officer Rasheed who looked even more disappointed than I was. I looked at the picture carefully. My sister Hajra followed me. I was tired. I was tired of thinking that I would sleep another night without a sign of my son: another restless night. God knows where he is. How is he? Is he alive or dead? Injured or mutilated? I just couldn't bear the fact that I was still alive, I was still safe. I wanted so badly to kill myself. I felt anger building up inside my body. Nothing seemed right anymore.

I closed my eyes and I could see him, wearing his favourite shirt, lying down in my lap. He wants to go to bed. I follow him upstairs to his room. He is sound asleep now. I can tell because his nostrils have started to flare every five minutes



and he does this when he is in deep sleep. I kiss him on his forehead and turn to go to my room. He is safe. He is safe for now. Nothing can harm him.

My phone rings. I know its ringing. I can hear it ringing. I just don't have the strength to pick it up. My sister says it was Officer Rasheed, who just wanted to check up on me.

'It's nothing to be worried about,' she said, forcing a smile. Not to worry? How can she even say that? She doesn't know. She doesn't know what I am going through. She didn't lose her son. She is not a widow struggling alone to find her son. She just doesn't know. That thought made me mad. My boy was kidnapped two weeks ago. I haven't had any contact with him, I haven't heard from him or seen him since then. Has he had anything to eat today or not? He is ten you know, I am worried about him. I don't even know if he is dead or alive. Hajra received another call she looked shocked.

'What is it?' I said. Silence. 'What is it?' I repeated.

'He is dead! Bilal is dead!' she said with tears rolling down her cheeks and panic in her voice. 'I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!'

I don't know why she was sorry. She didn't kill him. I was happy to hear that he was dead. At least now I know that he's with someone I can trust. Now I know that he's not being tortured by some cruel men. He's safe now and I'm happy.

'Its okay,' I told her smiling. 'He's in good hands now.'

I woke up with a sound of an annoying siren. It sounded like an ambulance. Hajra was crying so much: 'I'm sorry I had to do this.'

I didn't say anything. I was dumped in an ambulance and taken to a building. It was a very large building. It had one hundred and eight windows on the front façade. I know because I counted them as we drove past it. I was taken to a

room and locked in there with another lady. These people are crazy. They all are crazy. This entire world is crazy. They take innocent little children away from their mothers and when the children die their mothers are locked in small rooms. Pray for me, I'm the only sane person left here. He's dead now. And me? I'm just waiting to die.

## *The Joy Called 'Karachi'*

SARAH BEG

Sana dug her feet deeper in the grainy wet sand at Sea View beach and stared pensively at the horizon. She watched the sun descending rapidly leaving in its wake a sky shaded with hues of red and orange. Her reverie was broken when a hawker tried to peddle his seemingly inedible corn to her, and waving him away, she watched the sea of people milling around her. The water front was dotted with the young and old enjoying the cool breeze and the joyous shouts of children playing in the water brought a smile to her face. A bony horse neighed loudly behind her and the smell of his dung wafted into her nostrils compelling her to distance herself from the poor creature and move closer to the foamy water. She surveyed the long stretch of grey water and dirty brown sand littered with plastic bags, broken glass, and stray slippers characteristic of the beaches of Karachi. The beachfront was blotted with large and precariously perched billboards screaming advertisements for McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and The Village Restaurant. The familiarity of it all was heartwarming and she felt a sense of comfort amidst the myriad of people, camels, and stray dogs walking aimlessly into the horizon.

As her mind drifted to the previous evening, her heart sank and tears started to stream down her face. She turned to grasp her brother Raza's hand. The brother and sister stood in silence braving the wind which was whipping through their hair, supporting each other with tightly intertwined hands. Yesterday had been the end of another heart-warming summer



vacation with their beloved mother, grandparents, and cousins in Oxford. Yesterday had also signalled the start of another long and interminable wait till the next summer and the exercise of crossing out dates all over again on the calendar. Sana and her brother Raza were the products of a mixed marriage between a Pakistani man and an English woman. Their father Omar Khan had moved back to Pakistan after the divorce taking the two children with him, whilst their mother Jean had stayed back in England to try and salvage some remnants of her past life. Sana, like her mother, was tall, thin, and fair with light brown hair which reached her shoulders and was gifted with a charisma. Raza, who was older and taller, was a serious child with a countenance much beyond his years. He was rotund with a wheatish complexion, like his father.

The children were glad to be back in the folds of their grandmother's warm arms and the sounds of 'Dadi, Dadi' again reverberated in the house. There was an exciting energy emanating everywhere that bright morning with the grandmother, aunt, and maidservant encircling the children. Omar's beautiful sister Saleha, childless, who had been abandoned by her husband, had also moved with their mother to Omar's house, from Lahore, after their father's death. She had nurtured Sana and Raza as if they were her own children. As the day wore on, Sana had missed her mother more and more by the minute. The heavy weight of sadness propelled her to the chaotic beach across the road from her house as if she would be able to swim across the large expanse of water and reunite her with the distant parent. As the two children turned and weaved their way across the busy road towards their home, they were greeted by a blast of hot air, a cacophony of loud sounds, and a smell which is distinctively local. At that exact moment, Sana's heart soared and the joy of being back in her beloved Karachi coursed through her blood. Her shoulders lifted with pride in her beloved city and with a childlike enthusiasm she skipped all the way back home.

*Shaban Ali:*  
*'Thanks To My Lord for Everything'*

MARYAM NADEEM

I always wondered how a person, who was born in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a Pathan by origin, spoke like a native Urdu speaker. Shaban Ali Baba came to work as a guard when my house was still under construction. My father saw him looking after the house and from that time onwards he has been with us fulfilling his duty as a permanent caretaker.

When I asked him about his age he did not know, but apparently he is about seventy years old. He is short of hearing and cannot see properly with one eye. Every time I heard him talk it really tempted me to find out how he had such a clear Urdu accent so one day I finally asked him. When I asked Baba about coming to Karachi he told me, 'I came to Karachi at a very young age to find a living here.'

That statement made me want to know more about him so out of curiosity I asked him, 'How did you manage to come here when you were so young?' and his reply surprised me.

'With my servant,' he said. 'I ran away from my home to Karachi with my servant to seek refuge.'

It struck me that there had to be some good reason for such a young boy of his age to travel alone to Karachi with a servant and the word 'refuge' really meant there was more to his story.

'Why did you run away seeking refuge?' I persisted.

He answered, 'I was my parents' only son. My father had very good agricultural land holdings and we were a very well-off family. One day my relatives came to me and told me to go away with my servant to Karachi. At that time I did not know why I was being sent away, nor did I have a chance to meet my mother and father. My servant told me that I was never to go back to my homeland and that even he could have nothing to do with me anymore. I was told to make a living here in Karachi. Once here in Karachi I found work with people who were Urdu speaking and learnt the language from them. When I had grown up, about five to six years later, I learnt the reason why I had been sent away. My father's stepbrothers had killed both my father and my mother and had planned on killing me as well. And if I had ever gone back to my old home I surely would have been killed too. It pains me to know that this is the reality I have had to live with my whole life till today, but even though I have been tested I thank my Lord for everything from every possible corner of my heart.'

He could have inherited a good fortune but he was forced to live the life of a destitute. He could have enjoyed a comfortable household, a chance of finding a life partner, and could have had a joyous peaceful life with his family, but due to such cruel circumstances all his chances were lost forever. Recently, he found out that in his hometown, there are two orphaned children belonging to his relatives, so every month he sends half of his salary to those two children. And once he even went back to his old village to visit them. He does not trust anyone and has been forced to become a lonely soul. Whenever any newcomer comes to the house, he does not allow them to enter until he makes sure that the person has permission to enter. Yet he always distributes water, sweets, and food to the children in the neighbourhood who belong to the construction workers' families. He is a superb guard. You can find him performing his duty with utmost devotion and sincerity while listening to the music blaring on his recorder all through the day.



## *Capturing Light*

MAHNOOR ZAFAR

What I refused to understand all that time ago, I understand now. It happened when I saw the ordinary extraordinarily. People will think I am in a phase, an 'emotional' phase. But the truth is I am not. I only know how I see things now. How I feel their presence in my life and how I feel their absence.

I was in Karachi: an ordinary place, with ordinary people. I wasn't alone. My family, my parents and brothers were there with me. I had come all the way from Lahore. So for the first week I was in Karachi, I was miserable. Often, I found myself thinking about destiny. Isn't everything in our life destined to be? Doesn't God already know what we are going to do? Why are we here then? Why am I here then?

The answer came to me. Maybe God sent it to me. It's not about finding something different, it's about finding something special in the ordinary. And since then, I look up to the sky, and appreciate its beauty. It looks different every day. It smiles upon me even when I'm not looking. Whenever, I went to the beach, I saw how the tides beautifully crashed on the shore. But that wasn't what inspired me to make the present, my life, instead of the past or the future. It was my last day in Karachi. We had to head back to Lahore the next day. My family and I, we were at Hawkes Bay. I brought my camera. We enjoyed the water, the sun, the sand.

Not so far away, I saw two kids laughing and playing in the waves; shirtless and extremely thin. I wondered if they had

had food at all lately. Their mother was by their side, sitting and weeping. I thought maybe I could help, so I walked away from my family and over to them by myself with some money. As I drew closer, I felt a little awkward. I gave her the money and I saw the younger of her sons, by the sea, playing in the water. I walked over to him. He was an extremely playful child for someone so weak. He said, 'What did my mother tell you?'

I was a little surprised by the question but I told him how she said her life was miserable and how she had to work so hard for you kids. He started laughing, and put his free hand on his face. It was then I noticed he was missing two fingers. And it seemed as he had lost them just recently. His wounds and cuts looked fresh. I didn't ask him. But after he had stopped laughing he asked me, 'Did you believe her? Because if you do then you are stupid. She is lying to people all the time. And do you know why she was crying, because she cut off my fingers. She is a bad mother.'

I stared at him. He seemed about five years old and had been hurt so badly yet he was here, happy and playing. 'I am happy. I love my brother. He plays with me. He taught me something. You want to see?' He held out both his hands, and looked up to the sun. He then abruptly brought both his hands together. 'You know what I have?' I shook my head. He said, 'Sunlight. I have learnt to capture the sunlight. I feel special every time I do it.'

I didn't understand but I took a picture of him. I watched him run off. I smiled to myself. In those few minutes, I changed. I smile every time I think about it. 'The human heart is the most audacious thing God has ever created.' And that's what makes life worth living. Time is relative. I didn't even ask the boy's name and his face is blurred in my memory now but I became what I am now in these past two years, because of what a five-year-old boy taught me.

## *My Karachi*

MUHAMMAD MUDDASIR

The weather was so pleasant and it became more vivid with the sound of music playing in the car. Our car was going towards Clifton while we made plans for shopping and dinner as well. Karachi is becoming a place where you can find shopping malls, food courts, coffee shops, and a Food Street like Port Grand. It is only one side of Karachi which shows peace, wealth, and a fast-paced life. When the car neared the traffic signal instead of slowing down, Faisal looked around and drove the car recklessly through the red light. A person who was crossing the road fortunately just escaped being hit by the car. 'Faisal!' I shouted, 'Are you crazy?' Faisal replied with a smiling face. 'Come on Amir. . . . This is normal and everyone does this.'

I thought, in Pakistan, nobody wants to fulfil their responsibilities. We always blame the system. Perhaps we have learnt this attitude since childhood. We have so many excuses, like no one follows the rules so why should we? And if the same people go to Europe or any other country, they follow all the rules there. We reached Park Towers. I looked around. There was a long queue of cars and everyone was enjoying themselves in a different environment and no one looking at this scene could say that this was part of a poor country.

'Hi Sarah, sorry, you had to wait for me,' Faisal said to the friend who was waiting for him. In the food court, we were engaged in talking about future plans and the less than bright and in fact dark future of Pakistan while we ate Italian food. 'I love Europe. I will study there for a Masters degree.' She said.



I asked her if she'd been Europe. She said no. I thought: It's a social problem how we want to show our social status and rule over others because it is symbol of pride in the family if someone in that family is living is abroad or has a foreign nationality.

Sarah had to leave early because there was trouble in the city. Karachi is an unpredictable place; it can be shut down and brought to a halt within ten minutes only by spreading rumours of trouble. Unfortunately, it has been divided by different religious and political sects. The business environment, social life, and students' minds are effected significantly. But people now have become so used to this that the very next day after serious trouble in the city, life in Karachi becomes normal as though nothing had been happened the day before. We drove to Sea View. At night, Sea View is a breathtaking place because it's has a calm environment. When we were returning home, after crossing the Three Swords roundabout, I noticed a social welfare trust which was situated at the corner there which helps poor people selflessly on a daily basis. This too is another face of Karachi.

Just after crossing bridge at Nursery, we saw a crowd. An old man lay on the road because he was injured, but we didn't stop and help, we moved on even though we saw him in need of help. Next morning, I read in the newspaper that a person died before reaching the hospital because he was badly injured in an accident. If he could have reached the hospital ten minutes earlier, his life could have been saved. I threw the newspaper down and did not give this a second thought and went off to college. I engaged in my routine of life of studies, socializing, sharing thoughts of economic development etc. Nobody here has enough time to think about the true realities of society because everyone has their own interests. I, too, do not think because I am part of this society and it is a normal thing in our life.

## *The Colour of Flowers is Black*

NEELAM AHMED BASHEER

It was a bright sunny afternoon. We were driving home after picking up our daughters from school. Rani Apa and I were in the front seats while our two teenaged daughters sat in the back, as our tiny little Suzuki car whizzed on the smooth, wide road. It wasn't a coincidence that both Rani Apa's and my daughter were in the same school. We had planned it this way so that both of us sisters would spend as much time with each other as possible.

The girls were busy chatting with each other on the back seat, clutching their Archie Comic books in their hands and talking about their day in school, while we listened to old classical music tracks on the car tape player. I tried to explain the verses to them. 'Our great mystic poet Baba Fareed's words: 'My whole life has been spent walking on toes/Oh black cloud, behold your rain as yet/In the season of red roses, the colour of the flowers is black.'

Then Rani Apa asked me, 'Do you remember the Rose House?'

The Rose House had been an unspoken, unmentioned taboo subject amongst us for almost 25 years, so why did she even bring it up now? Back then, Rani Apa and I were eighth and tenth grade students. We would usually take a shortcut through a narrow lane, which made us get to the school quicker. Rani Apa was always very eager to pass through the shortcut, because of her fascination with a unique looking little brick house that sat right in the middle of the lane. This



was because the house had a riot of colourful roses growing majestically all over its façade and the sides, making it look like a flower castle draped in dazzling colour and splendour.

One quiet and cold morning, we reached the lane when no other girl was there except us, but soon enough we spotted Zahra, a schoolmate, walking ahead of us in the lane. From out of nowhere a man riding a bicycle had snuck up on Zahra from behind and passing by her had suddenly grabbed one of her breasts like a hungry animal pawing to catch a piece of meat. Traumatized by the incident, Zahra shook with terrified sobs. We tried to console and comfort her but to no avail. I hurled curses at the man, but he rode his bike as fast as he could and fled.

Many months later we took the shortcut lane again it was completely deserted. Rani Apa wanted to quickly admire the flowers of the Rose House. But I spotted a bicycle coming from the opposite direction in the lane and recognized the face of the same man who had attacked Zahra. The depraved man exposed his private parts for us to see. Apa screamed in terror and I picked up a brick from the ground and attempted to throw it at him. He sped by on his bicycle unaffected. We felt violated and stripped off of our childhood.

I turned and peeked at our daughters in the back seat once again. They looked so youthful, vibrant, optimistic, and carefree. I turned my head and saw a big broad van standing next to our car at the traffic light. There were ten or fifteen young men sitting in it staring at our daughters through the van's greasy windows. Their faces and bodies were covered entirely in thick, dark coloured warm *chaadars*, and the only thing that was exposed were their Kalashnikovs and their deep dark eyes and the hungry expression in them.

'Shameless naked men,' Rani Apa's firm and authoritative voice spat out in disgust at the men.



## *The Story of the Worst Day of My Life*

QAMBER AWAN

On a bright Friday morning I dropped my wife at her office in DHA. The red light finally changed to yellow and before it could turn green, the cars had already started moving, so I also started moving. There was a fat guy wearing a black jacket on a motorbike with a very small kid a girl, not more than five, wearing a school uniform. The white car ahead of both of us suddenly pulled its brakes and the bike rider, crashed into the white car, while I hastily slammed the brakes of my car as well. The man and his daughter had fallen on the road. The bike's back wheel was still moving which was causing it to move a little bit under my car. While I was trying to help the man get up, a crowd grew out of nowhere. Within four seconds of the fall, there were almost twenty people already running and trying to rescue the man and his child. Karachiites like to help others a lot.

Three people from the crowd grabbed my shirt and the guy now tried to slap me saying, 'You rich people in cars think that we people on bikes are just insects and you can drive over us.'

'Oh my God,' I thought in my mind. 'What the . . . ?' I could see his face getting extremely angry and the crowd held onto me like I was the criminal.

The bike rider now got even angrier and was saying to the people, 'Don't let him go. We have to teach them a lesson so

they will respect people like us.' He along with his daughter got in my car. He told me using expletives, 'I am taking your car now. Do whatever you can!' And off he went.

I decided to call the police. To my surprise I received a call back from police and they showed up to go with me to the scene of the crime. I sat in the front of the van with a driver and another inspector. The police driver asked his inspector, 'How can we drive there we've run out of diesel?'

I held my head and thought, 'Oh my God, their life is miserable.' That was just the beginning of a very long day with the police with incidents of police cars running out of diesel and policemen being told off by their bosses while they tried to help me find my car as I sat wedged between them or helped them push their diesel-less vans. Much later, I got an SMS from my brother: my car had been abandoned near my house. I still wanted to thank the police for all their help.

One of the officers said, 'You got your car, now what about us?'

I replied, 'What about you? I don't understand.' I started feeling uncomfortable.

'Well, your car is listed as being snatched and you cannot drive your car until we clear it off the stolen car's list, because you might get caught by the police even if you are driving your own car.' So finally after much back and forth I finally paid off the police.

I went to pick up my wife. She seemed extraordinarily beautiful that day, may be because of all the ugly faces I had been seeing all day long. I had to go to an interview which I missed. I had lost almost 2000 rupees for so-called 'sweetening' of the process. The man who was on the bike might have been frightened by the accident or frustrated and showed his anger towards the class of society who could afford

to have big cars while he could not even provide a safe vehicle for his daughter whom he loved a lot. All the people in that crowd who were dressed in dirty clothes and were on foot or were passengers of a passing bus, who also showed their anger, were showing their anger for their deprived place in our society. After all this I am not angry at that man even though he cursed me and broke the keychain of my car keys; instead I just wish him well and wish that he had enough money to buy a safe vehicle to take his daughter to school, so he won't get into another accident. And for myself I would say that it was just an unlucky day, otherwise would I be writing the first ever story in my life?



## *Rain! Rain! Come again!*

RABIA TUFAIL

It was raining and the rain had summoned the sea breeze. I looked up and saw silvery clouds cascading in the sky. I walked with small steps, trying to savour each moment. The ground stained with pigeon droppings and *paan* spit glistened. The rhythm of the rain was rebounding from all corners; exploding in puddles, hitting the tarps of the street vendors, hitting the windows of the dilapidated apartment buildings like bullets, and making music which included the laughter of children. The birds sitting on the lines flapped their wings majestically and fluttered around the sky in sequence like delicate ballerinas. Cars rushing by made no sound, no horns were honked, as if the drivers were preventing themselves from disrupting this artwork in motion.

I had an urge to sit on the sidewalk and watch this spectacle before the rain died away. I noticed my classmates coming towards me.

'Hey! The boys and I were thinking let's bunk school today!' one of them said and nudged me with his elbow. We decided to take a trip to Sea View.

But something caught my excited eye. It was a small figure, crouched on the ground, examining a tarnished glass ball with his dirt shrouded hands. His face was worn out not just with dirt but with sadness, tears streaked down his face and left their tracks but prominent amongst it all were his eyes. They were glinting, even on this dim day. He noticed me gawking

at him, so he stood up and advanced towards me in his small rubber slippers. He scratched his head, his fingers tousling his dust laden hair. He held up his right hand in front of me and said in a voice almost unheard, 'Please sahib, I haven't eaten in days, please give me some money or at least buy me some bread . . . I promise I won't ask for more!' I had a fifty rupee note left in my bag which I planned to spend on rides and food at Sea View but now I was compelled to hand it over to that forlorn soul. But my own needs took over me and I climbed into the congested rickshaw, leaving behind the haunting gaze clouded in the thick combustion smoke spattering from the rickshaw.

Later on my way home a faint and delicate sound reached my ears somehow. It was coming from a trash heap nearby. A cardboard box, all soaked was laying flopped open, on the heap. I stepped over to it and discovered three small kittens, wriggling agitatedly. My feet were glued to the ground, as my mind tried to process the decision I had to take now. Three suckling kittens would cause a war in my house, as my mother was intolerant towards cats. Before the weather got crueller, I had to find shelter for myself. If I had the ability to understand animals, I wouldn't have averted my eyes from the helpless kittens; their cries would have exploded my ears. After I entered the safe quarters of my comfortable house, something struck me deeply. It wasn't relief, it wasn't gratitude but it was a large chunk of undigested guilt. When the kid approached me, frail with hunger, I refused to help him just because my pleasure was more superior to his life. When those kittens, those shivering kittens, cried and flexed their tiny paws, cold with fear, my time was more superior to their lives.

And so I stared out of my window, it wasn't the last of the rainy days in this city mingled with conflicting intricate feelings and aspirations. Clouds will visit me once again and I have to be prepared.

## *A Simple Story*

BEATRICE VALARIE LOUIS

It was an ordinary December day in Karachi. I woke up to the smell of *parathas* and eggs being prepared in the kitchen. Like every day, I prayed to God to be with me throughout the day and make my day an exciting one as I was tired of the same old routine of a college student. Morning started off in the usual way, *nok jhok* with my brothers, my father's lecture on the importance of reading the newspaper daily, and mother's list of the advantages of having breakfast.

I headed off to college with a dreadful feeling of having forgotten all that I had learnt for the Physics test. When the final bell rang at last, I handed over the paper to my professor who stood with a knowing smirk on his face. Reaching home, I ran to my room, flopped onto my bed, and entered my dreamland with no physics exams or any other mental torture. Then I forced myself out of bed, got dressed, and refusing my mother's pleas to finish the half-eaten sandwich, headed for the coaching centre which is a twenty-minute walk from my house.

I chose to walk that day because I was upset. I wanted to get rid of the building tension in the pit of my stomach. Half way through the familiar road, I noticed a sudden commotion all around me as men who were earlier sitting huddled in *paan* shops and men who were enjoying the *doodh patti* in the cold evening, left their respective groups and ran around yelling frantically, 'Close the shutters! Close the shutters!'



I stood there paralyzed; my mind refused to work and just as I forced myself to think of the safest possible way back home, I saw a familiar figure moving toward me. The sight of my brother brought such relief to me that I felt like crying. I vowed that day never to fight with him and to treat him like a king, so immense was my relief. He pulled me out of the street and onto the main road because people were firing with handguns from their balconies in the lanes. As he led me towards the safety of our house, we witnessed vehicles being set on fire by a group of men who were no less than hooligans. These men were damaging other people's property as if it was their own and were not thinking twice before breaking the car windows and removing the tyres from cars and motorcycles to set on fire in the middle of the road. The vehicle owners, with no choice left, were running towards safety, turning around to see the last of their hard-earned assets being ruined and turned to ashes.

Even though it took us a full fifteen long minutes, it was the most terrifying and frightful walk back home. I rushed into my house to find everyone glued to the TV set. On the television I saw a huge crowd outside a hospital in Rawalpindi, crying and screaming. Yes, it was the 27 December 2007, when Benazir Bhutto was killed, when Karachi, the City of Lights, turned into the City of Darkness.

Even though my terror-filled evening ended, but all the damage of people's property, all that firing, that entire blackout, the strikes that were held for the days to come, could not bring her back.

## *Kolachi*

SANIA IQBAL SIDDIQUI

TV shows babble on about how cruel Kolachi is and how badly she has been treated by her superiors. If you ask me, it's not her fault. She wanders off on her own, speaking to herself and to someone who doesn't exist. Is it a mental disorder?

Sipping a hot mug of coffee, savouring the delight that caffeine gives my system; I looked at the dark skies outside while I thought about all the Red Devils in disguise. I was thinking about my beautiful things. I'm just an ordinary girl dreaming extraordinary things like how to be pretty in one minute. Are you kidding me? I am so not into those ads which claim that being light-skinned or as we say 'being fair' is the key to getting a perfect husband. Seems like everyone is looking for a shortcut these days. But as I joked with my pet dog about shoes, villas, and food for the greedy, a siren could be heard from a distance. It sounded like an ambulance, since there are so many that run by my neighbourhood to pick up those lucky lads who are shot in the name of Valentine spirit by Cupid himself. It did not prevent me from taking my dog out for a stroll in these trying times.

Kolachi, she cooks to perfection. On one hand you have the spiciness of the Arabian cuisine and on the other the *desi* version of Chinese. Scrumptious! Finger licking good!

All bad things happen in the dark, if you know what I mean right?

These streets I wander in the darkness give me time to think about my surroundings. And I have a feeling that my dog is barking since these are trying times. Saber is my bodyguard and is cautioning me to take a step back and come home. I surrender my free will. It was rumoured that there were certain 'undesirables' in the area where I was, when some crazies came with fireworks. Others thought it was a celebration for something. It was actually a patriotic event marred by bits of coal and tar. Not pleasing to think about, don't you agree?

Oh! The stuff Karachiites say! I heard a man at the convenience store buying a mosquito spray saying, '*Yaar koi machar maarne ka spray dena. Acha ho . . . khandani ho.*' Well, here's another one: At a clothing outlet a Pathan shopkeeper says to me, '*Baji yaahaan aa ke dekh lo. Zaalim kapra hai baji.*' Seriously? *Zaalim*? Cloth that is 'cruel'! Eh?

Kolachi is a shrink. You can tell her about anything. Have you noticed, there are some of those who lay awake at night thinking of a shooting star and how their wishes will come true? They think a blue genie will come out and grant their wishes. Well it is true. If you think Kolachi will grant you three wishes, think again. She will grant you infinite wishes.

The loss of a child is nothing but natural. I am sorry but I think I am going off track with this. Where was I? Yes. My love for her is bigger than anyone has ever imagined and for this I salute her: Kolachi, my dreamer, my saviour, to you I owe my life. And this is me crying.



*'Our'*

FATIMA RASOOL

'Our'. Such a beautiful and unifying word. No matter what, these three letters are strong enough to unite millions of people divided because of millions of reasons. This word also had a deep influence in our past when there was no Pakistan but we needed one. 'Our' brought a lot of 'my's' together.

I belong to a not-so-developed part of the country and my siblings and I always thought of Karachi as a dreamland. We had travelled to cities like Jacobabad, Sukkur, Larkana, and Hyderabad. And then one day we were on our way to Karachi. Karachi was the first big city that we had ever visited. And as soon as we entered into it we felt huge ourselves. I felt that I had expanded and that I could breathe more easily. Although people say it's polluted but at that time it felt so fresh to me. I liked everything about it: every single person walking on the roads, each billboard, everything. There was nothing that I did not like.

Suddenly a strange feeling started tickling inside of me. I felt as if I had fallen in love with Karachi. And it was the buildings and the people and the spaciousness that made me feel what I was feeling. It was something that I still cannot express. I was laughing at myself. How could it be possible, what a joke that I did not live here in this city where I so clearly belonged. I was so upset, so very upset. All I could think of that moment was resentment towards my father who was the reason why we did not live in Karachi.

One day during our stay we went to see Quaid-i-Azam's mausoleum. To be able to visit it one day was one of my dreams. When we got there, I could not believe our good fortune, and then it started raining. The best rain of my life. I turned around and saw my father. He had fallen right there in front of the steps leading up to the Quaid's tomb. My siblings rushed to help my father get back on his feet but he had fallen so hard that his glasses were missing and he was standing there with his neck aching badly. Now I loved Jinnah even more. My city had finally taken its revenge on my father for making me live in another part of the country.

Nothing on earth could take that moment away from me as my victory was my victory alone. I kept saying to myself, 'You paid the price of making me live away from *my* city.' Yet, it didn't last, this sense of importance. Why was I so unable to celebrate? 'My', the word that had always been alien to me. Was I the intruder? Was I the corrupter trying to play a bad role? I was shattered and I wanted to undo this. I looked deep down into my soul and found that this was the word I did not want to carry with me. It divided me, discriminated against me, and almost drowned me.

Lying there in my bed that night I went back to that place where my father lay. I held his hands in mine. I just wanted to stand there with him saying nothing, feeling everything, and realized it was after all not *my* city, it was *our* city, *our* Karachi. No matter where I live, it will always be ours.

## *Pearl*

ASMA SIDDIQUI

The tiny drop falling from the sky seemed hesitant. The wide swath of sea was splashing and crashing loudly against the beach as if beckoning the raindrop towards it. Quiet and calm, lying on the sea-shore were the oyster-shells with their mouths open, looking expectant. The raindrop looked doubtful. What should it do? Should it become a part of the never-ending sea, just like all the other drops that were mingling into the sea or should it drop itself into the oyster-shell . . . live a life of solitude . . . and eventually turn into a precious pearl . . . the one that could be adored by one and all! The waves looked happy, calling the raindrop to join in and dance with them. Ignoring their calls, the raindrop decided to slip into the oyster-shell.

Ahsan, a young boy of fifteen, walked along the beach in Karachi. He was perplexed, indecisive, and unsure, feeling the same way as the tiny raindrop. His friends had all opted for the Science Group in the Intermediate, but he was still unsure of what he should take. His head ached severely. The world seemed to be spinning. He could hear his friends' voices echo in his mind: 'People who do not take up the Science Group at this stage end up nowhere.'

His future looked hazy. Ahsan was allergic to Maths the most, but now, there seemed to be no other choice than to opt for it. After all, this looked like the sure-shot recipe for success. There was no guidance from the school, from the government or from the college. Whom should he consult? The waves



lashed onto the seashore, striking against the rocks with force, as if, showing their anger at Ahsan for being indecisive.

Even if he ignored the voices of his friends, Ahsan thought, how could he let go of the dreams and expectations of his parents? Besides, his elders could never choose anything wrong for him. Could they? He remembered the time, when as a small child he had asked his mother: 'How does the moon shine?'

She smiled and replied: 'The sun is responsible for its radiance and the white light it generates.'

'But, why doesn't it have its own light? How can it take something which is not its own? Isn't that wrong?' he asked, perplexedly.

'Because, it cannot create its own light.'

'But, why? It should!'

His mother smiled broadly at his confused look. 'The moon is weak and weak things cannot create.'

Ahsan felt weak. His mother was right, weak things cannot produce their own light, they can only borrow it. But perhaps the society he was living in had always accepted people with weak convictions, as they maintain a peaceful environment. No questions, no opposition, no breaking the norms, just live and let live, like everyone else does

He looked up at the rain coming down and thought about whether each was the same or had a different destiny. Each raindrop could become part of the sea or it could turn into a pearl. . . .

## *Pir Ilahi Buksh Colony*

FAIZ-UN-NISA

One fine day, at about nine in the morning, I found myself getting down a long, very long ladder. One end of this ladder was on the ship from which I was coming down with my parents, the other end was touching the beach, where the relatives of the passengers were anxiously waiting for their arrival. The ship was Dumbra which sailed between Bombay and Karachi in the early fifties, bringing cargo as well as passengers. I still remember how excited I was to see my two brothers who had come to receive us at Keamari.

On the way home, my brother told my father, 'We have bought a house in Pir Ilahi Buksh Colony, the first residential place for those who have newly arrived in Karachi'—Sindh was receiving us with open arms. On reaching home, I found that the house was new; it had two rooms, two verandas, and an open space at the back. The day soon passed and darkness started when the soft, sweet sound of tinkling of bells was heard. I ran towards the window and was overjoyed to see a long row of camels. Small bells hung from their necks creating music as the camels moved gently into the night. These camels had come from Malir with a supply of fresh vegetables for the Sabzimandi, and were going back now only to return early in the next morning.

Within a few days, I had become familiar with people in and around our lane. Our next door neighbour was a school teacher who had migrated from Ambala with his three sons and three daughters. In the row of houses in front of ours

were two families from Lahore which had settled in Karachi as they hoped for better business prospects here, the city being the capital of the new country, Pakistan. In another house lived an old couple from Delhi who lived with their two grandchildren. The parents of the children had been killed on the train on the way to Lahore from Delhi.

The days in the summer were hot but evenings were pleasant due to the cool and refreshing breeze. At night, especially moonlit nights, people enjoyed being in their *aangans* on their charpoys. Near the bus stops of every locality one could find a few big and many small shops where people would go to buy grocery. At the milk shop, we could always see a number of people enjoying *lassi* with *pera*. Wood was also sold as fuel. In a wood shop, I could see a big wooden balance to weigh one *maund* (forty *seers*) at a time. I remember my friend and I had sat in it once, and the shopkeeper had announced, 'Together, both of these girls weigh forty *seers*!' And everyone there laughed.

In those days, the people of Karachi led simple lives. They had enough time to see their relatives, neighbours, and friends, and sharing, discussing, and solving problems used to be a regular affair.

God bless our city—so that its people may live here happily ever after.



## *A Tale of Two Days*

JAHANGIR BOHIO

The sun over Karachi had finally taken his last bow and slipped below the horizon. Darkness was taking over the humid evening. Ali sat worried and waiting for the punishment he duly deserved. Again he had left the shop and gone to play cricket while his father was away at the mosque to offer *zuhr* prayers. The last time he had committed the same mistake, he was saved only by his mother. Waheed Khan, Ali's father, who ran a tyre puncture repair shop, was already past fifty. He was blessed with a son after years of prayers and patience. Ali was only eleven years old and he could not mend the tyres. Waheed Khan had instructed him to stay at the shop after school while he was in the mosque to offer prayers. Now Ali's heart was beating fast but he somehow managed to open the door. Waheed Khan entered, he came straight in and sat in a chair without saying a word.

'Did you enjoy playing cricket?' Waheed Khan asked Ali after few minutes of rest.

Ali couldn't say anything in fear and just stood there.

'Come here, son!' Waheed Khan said balancing himself in the chair. Waheed Khan pulled Ali gently towards him and kissed his cheeks. Ali, now in his father's hug, was relieved and was smiling at his mother. She also could not hold back her smile for long and was smiling back at him with a tinge of tears in her eyes. At lunch, Ali promised his parents that he would never again leave the shop.

Next day, it was a usual noisy afternoon Karachi. Waheed Khan was in the mosque to offer prayers. A procession of people from a political party was passing on the road in front of the shop holding flags in their hands. Three young men appeared in front of the shop on a motorcycle.

‘Father has gone to mosque. He’ll be back soon,’ Ali said quickly.

‘Drop the shutters! Close the shop!’ said one of the men on the motorcycle in anger.

Ali remembered the promise he had made to his parents the day before and refused to close the shop. The man sitting in the middle on the motorcycle took out a pistol, shot him in the chest, and then they disappeared.

Ali bled to death and the rally marched ahead dancing and roaring.

Waheed Khan in the mosque, unaware of Nature’s decisions, held up his hands in prayer, ‘O Allah! You are the only one Who gives happiness and sorrows, and Ali is the only source of happiness for me. Always keep a smile on his face and give him a long life. *Ameen!*’

Karachi is home to thousands of Waheed Khans who don’t know what the next moment hold for them.

## *Life in the Sixties in Saddar, Karachi*

NAFISA TAPAL

This is what it was like as a child in Saddar town and living next to the tram tracks: I looked out the window of the old wooden building that shook and swung back and forth every time a tram passed by. The fire temple (Parsi *agari*) was across the street and every morning well-dressed Parsi women and men came for their prayers. I was not well and had to stay at home. I could tell the time by looking at the outside world. The empty tram was swinging and dancing on the track. The smell of frying *jalibi* was coming from the nearby shop that is famous for its sweets. The owner was called Poochjee, which means soft, due to the softness of his *gulab jamuns*. People were buying big and small *jalibis* and the juice of the sweets was dripping from the brown paper bags. The sweeper sweeping the road and scrubbing the horse dung from the street created the sound of grinding the stone on the ground. Men came out of the mosque after morning prayers. When I became unwell, I saw life in a different stroke, which has been intact since then. Even though the doctor was not very hopeful, my inner self pushed me to struggle and force myself to live life in its every turn.

At midday the street changed into a chaotic one. Fruit vendors from all over the city come to this area but constantly play hide and seek with the policeman that lurk in the near by lane. The bus, the rickshaw, the cycle, and the Victoria *wala* have parked their vehicles haphazardly just to outdo each other and be able to get to the passengers first. As the



sun moved directly overhead, I could smell the freshly baked bread from the bakery next door, the famous Adam Sumar. This meant it was noon and people were coming to buy bread from the bakery and returning to their homes for lunch. As the afternoon changed into evening, the atmosphere changed again and I could see lots of women on the street. The Goans with their western style of dress and short hair were out to buy things from Bohri bazaar. The Bohra ladies wearing saris were out as well to do their chores and the Parsis were coming out of the temple and would buy cakes and freshly baked biscuits from the small bakery, Anjarwala. The Bohri bazaar was the main shopping area for all sorts of clothes, just like the nearby Elphinstone Street area where people used to park their cars and navigate on foot the narrow lanes of the Bohri bazaar. Victorias were available for hire for an evening out at the famous Frere Hall garden which was the centre for all activities. Dignitaries used to come to the venue for *ziyafat* (dinner) parties while this place was also known for its horticulture shows and Eid prayers too.

Everyone heard call for the evening prayer which was called out from the Memon Masjid; there was no other competition for the *azaan* then. People would run to the mosque for prayers, not for any other purpose like *tabligh* etc. No one else was residing there, except for a few dedicated people who would maintain the place and keep it clean. Masjid-goers would make small contributions for maintenances. Religious people had so much dignity that they never asked for any money.

All the lights were turned on now and strange looking women dressed in black were walking on the street, while everyone else was preparing to go back home, packing up their pushcarts that were parked on the road. The *burqa*-clad women were talking to different men on the road and I never understood why these ladies were out while everyone

else was going home. I asked my *dadi* why they were not going home and why they were dressed like this but I never got any answer. The tram passed by again swinging on the tracks, carrying a few passengers. The tram would come to a halt by 9:30 p.m. and the whole city would become quiet by 10:30. Then it would change into a lonely street. My heart sank as the number of people on the street diminished and as my pain returned. I took my medicine which made me weaker and the drowsiness made my eyelids heavy. I felt my mom's hand on my forehead and the sound of her recitation put me to sleep.

## *Karachi's Fate through Time*

SYED OSAMA TAHIR ZAIDI

The sea roared on the silent starry night, its waves crashing on the silver shores. The sand gleamed in the light of the moon and not far from this magnificent sea stood a great tower, its head touching the sky. Through the single window of this tower, two old men wrapped in silence gazed up at the sky.

‘The sea is ageless yet full of age. It is timeless and has seen many ages. It is a blessing and a terrible beast which keeps itself restrained. It has swallowed empires, towns, kings, emperors, wicked and holy. It remains and bears the changes of this world and it has hardly changed through time,’ said the first old man in a very slow and hushed tone enunciating each word.

The second old man asked in the same hushed tone, ‘What does it say?’

‘There will be a time when nothing will be safe. The sea will change its colour and the sky will burst asunder and throw down everything over this city. At that time nothing will be safe and morals will die; that will be the time when the sea will break from its boundary and rush over the city.’

‘Indeed, you speak truly. But who else will know the fate of this city? Life will continue for a long time in Debal. Monuments will rise, civilizations will fall, and the sea will wash over it. Indeed, it is counting the time, waiting for the moment.’

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The morning seemed dim on this new day. However, life continued in the city indifferent to the weather. People walked on the roads, birds flew in the sky, women busy in shopping, men with grave expressions busy in their daily business. Everything seemed normal, but despite the usual routine, the city was lost in a blackout of crime, envy, and melancholy. The people were wrecked, and somewhere in the same city there was another world lost completely in the gloom of ancientness and poverty. Yet the sea had the news of everyone and it stirred at each cry of the destitute, it rumbled at each call of sorrow, for long ago the sea had heard a prophecy. Still, the sea could not be allowed to leave its boundary at any moment. We waited for the right moment; we who had this knowledge, we who had been posted here, over this job from the start of the world. The fate of this city was sealed, this city full of colour and darkness.

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Every day I had woken up with the hope to see my beautiful city full of happiness and peace; people without trouble or worry. Each day I had opened my eyes in the hope that one day I would see my city free of the tyrants and evils and yet each day I had met with despair. My life had passed in fear and poverty and now I stood at the turning point of my life. My education was complete and I had established myself as a successful man in life. Today was the day I was going to join in a pure bond with the one I loved more than life. I, Huzaifah, was finally married to Tania. The blessings were given and then suddenly, cries of happiness were mixed with cries of pain and agony. I looked at Tania standing in her red apparel and from her hand dripped a red gory liquid. Everything was getting dark and I saw a few men covered in black and as realization hit me, a cry of pain escaped my mouth and I saw the world going black.

I walked towards the black sea under the dark sky. My life was at an end. I had forgotten the meaning of hope and felt weak. The pain in my heart was agonizing. I walked towards the sea and looked at its waves hitting the shore and I remembered the oath Tania and I had made at the sea. A tear trickled from my eyes and I screamed, 'Today, my life is yours and my heart will always be yours. We will live together and die when our world will end. The sea will bear witness.' Then I looked towards the sea, the feeling of lost love hit me again with a new gush. I said, 'Today, in the name of love, rise and crush the evil.' Then I felt blackness creeping over my mind and just before falling into oblivion, I muttered, 'O Allah, grant me justice.'

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I watched the crying of the man who had lost his parents, siblings, and the one who he dearly loved. He had said the magic words for which we had been waiting from centuries. The time had come, the spell had been uttered, the signs had emerged over the sky, and so I and my companion Sea Angels began to strike the Wall holding the sea in its boundary. The walls broke with a clamour and the sea rushed towards this bowl-shaped city like a hungry monster ready for supper. The city which was full of darkness, despair, hate, blood, and crime was going to end. The people gazed towards the new trouble that was coming towards them, for a moment stunned, and then began the great commotion as people began to rush away screaming. Buildings went down and the people clung to anything that could save them. There was an explosion of news bulletins on the TV channels. People began to pray and started to cry, accepting their end had come. The water dragged everyone in and after successfully submerging half of the bowl-shaped city, it began to spread over the other half.

A young boy named Arshad Hakim watched all this happening. As the water neared the foot of the hill on which

the village stood, he began to pray to Allah for the safety of his small world. The sky began to rumble and clouds covered it. Arshad closed his eyes and kept praying. He loved Allah and knew that He listened to all who fought for good in the challenges of life; those who prayed with a pure heart, the pure heart full of love and hope. The sky rumbled more ferociously but Arshad stood undaunted even though the sea had reached his feet and it was without doubt the time for the end of Karachi had come.

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There was a sudden change in the signs and a new command lay at our hands. It was unexpected indeed. We felt startled for a second but for obedience we had been made. Thus we flew towards the point where the sea had reached and struck our staffs on the ground. The earth shook and the waves began to quiver and disappear under the surface of earth. It was the end of the great flood in this city. I wondered for a moment of why there was a change of command and then my gaze fell over a boy who had his eyes closed and his face emitted a pure light. Love had begun the disaster and it was love which had finally ended it.

I began to fly towards the sky; behind me were my partners from the many centuries. One half of Karachi, once known as Krokola in the time of Alexander and then Debal in the time of Arabs, had been reduced to a barren land. A tower began to rise from the surface and behind this tower stood a long line of people in a ghostly form. It was time for the beginning of a new civilization. The ghostly people waved at the boy. The doors of the tower opened and dejectedly the souls began to walk through the door. They had lost their lives for this city now it was time for a long rest and the wait for the Great Judgment. Karachi was to grow back into its vivid colours in a matter of years. One thing was indeed true: Love is the beginning of a disaster and the end of it,



during which a person faces the most difficult tasks of his life. The doors of the tower closed and it began to sink in the sea. One last message appeared in the sky, illuminated by the faint rays of sunlight: 'Do not let your Love drown. Love is everything. Love is your code for this life. Love Allah and strive to protect your identity and your faith.' Millions of eyes witnessed this message and many began to weep, while many heads fell in *sajdah* for their Great Lord, Allah Almighty. They had understood the meaning of their life and it was time for them to rise. The time had come for the people to rise and flood over the world to purify it.

## *When Opportunity Knocks*

TASNEEM INAM

I am Ahmed. Ahmed, the garbage picker; Ahmed, the older brother who must work to feed his siblings and mother; Ahmed, the stutterer; Ahmed, the student who had to drop out of high school after his father committed suicide; Ahmed, the Merchant of Kolachi. I grew up in the 'big city'. Therefore, like all city kids I dream. Of what do I dream? I envy. Who do I envy? I pray. How can I believe in God? I even smile. How is this possible? I grab the opportunity for a better life.

Late one Thursday, Mr Rasheed came in for his usual haircut. Irfan barked, 'Ahmed, sahib is here, get him seated and prepped.' I knew the routine well: drape the cloth, with flair, always. Oil and massage the hair, grimy and black from the smoke and soot in the streets, yet cool to the touch—the luxury of an air-conditioned car, an air-conditioned salon, an air conditioned home. Shampoo, rinse, dry, ready. All for Rs 10 per day. Oh yes, I am paying off my father's debt, I am sure, for the rest of my life. My head swoons—now, do it now or never. Opportunity—I had read in school, oh so long ago—never knocks twice. Mr Rasheed was asleep. I did it.

This is not the end of the world. 'Ammi, are you ready, is everyone here? Let's go, come on, I will carry our pot, Rehman you carry the clothes, move, move, move!' A new life; yes, opportunity does not knock twice. We all reached our new home. Shelter, with a roof, not the sidewalk. A new start, no more rag-picking after the barbershop to get food.

I am now in school, I ride the waves with my new friends. After all, fishing is in my blood, I am a Kolachiite. Later in school I learn how to read, add, and speak like Mr Rasheed, a distant dream now, a haze, a mirage. Languages are my forte; I can fluently speak the local languages Sindhi, Baluchi, Pashto, Punjabi, Urdu, Gujrati, Mekani, as well as English, French, and Arabic.

They tell me I waste myself here; perhaps opportunity will knock again. The big city wears you down. Why is family important? I could be anything, do anything if I didn't have to feed them. Ammi says, I am a good son. A good son helps his family, and how do I help them out of this misery? Yes, yes, I am a good boy. I am clever. I will not let them suffer anymore. Opportunity . . . shall I take it? Clean, very clean, it was so easy. Now I am a businessman, a merchant. Yes, I have a house, a car too, and servants. I am Mr Rasheed, I go to Irfan's for my weekly shave. They don't even recognise me. I go twice a week sometimes. I like to test them: will they recognise me? Oh my God! That is it. They cannot, even in their wildest dreams, imagine that it could be me, little Ahmed, rag-picker Ahmed.

A phone call. 'May I speak with Mr Ahmed? I'm calling from the Edhi Centre.' A sweet, melodious voice. Who is behind that voice. I must know. I want to meet her.

'Yes, this is him, what can I do for you?'

'We would like you to come down to identify someone, please. The address is. . . .' I don't listen any further. A person! Who? Why should I identify them? How did they get my number?

'Shanmugan, Edhi Centre on Tariq Road, quickly. Stop at La Boulangerie, I must eat.'



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'Jee, sahib, right away.' What kind of name was Shanmugan? I never asked him where he was from. Did he have family? I shake my head to clear it. What am I doing?

'Sahib, Edhi.'

I alight from my BMW7. Only the better than best for Ahmed, the rag-picker. Why is this coming back to me today? There is a dilapidated desk, but the most serene face behind it. She must be the one, that voice. Then I hear it. Sweet, syrupy, just like the molasses Ammi used to give me with the *paratha*. She would save all month so I could have the treat, she would give it to me at 2 a.m. when everyone else was asleep. She made sure I would not have to share it with anyone; I, her good son. I shake my head. Why today? What is wrong? I only took opportunities where I saw them. Anyone else would have done the same. 'Yes, you called me to identify someone.'

'Come this way please. Mr Ahmed, do you know who this is?' I am jerked out of my reprieve, a pleasant daydream that I relish. Black walls, all round, actually I think they are white. Cockroaches in the corner! That smell, I know it, I am used to it. My head spins, reeling, Ammi, Rehman, Fouzia, Isra, Bilal, Hadia. Oh! So long ago, a lifetime of opportunity. That smell again, the garbage heap, left from the hospital dump, twenty steps straight ahead, then jump over the slimy green glittering stream of diamonds and sewage. Turn right, then where? Yes, yes it is coming back, turn right and I see the *mazaar* in the distance, the dream of a state of equals. The final resting place of the creator of Pakistan, the land of opportunity.

'Mr Ahmed, do you know this person?' I look past Ms Telephone Voice at an old shrivelled heap. So thin that it is more flat than wide. A pea-sized bun on the top of the head, it must be a woman. Bleeding feet—from cuts and scars, from

poverty. I can't see the face, I manoeuvre round the heap. I take a look. Dark, sunburnt, wrinkles, toothless, who is it?

'Ahmed, my good son. I knew you would come home. Look everyone is here.'

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'You are at OMI, in the deluxe private room. The Edhi ambulance brought you here.'

'I have to go back, how long have I been here, where is my mobile? I need to make calls.'

'Sit down. You have been in a near fatal car crash on M.A. Jinnah Road. A passerby brought you in. You were very lucky. You have been here for over a year, we had given up all hope.'

'Where is Ammi?' I am confused. I was at the Edhi Centre; I was the good son who came home at last; the last opportunity, I took it. I was with Ammi, I was going to take her home.

'Beta, my son hit you; we have been paying for your treatment. Do you know where you live so we can take you home? Your mother will be waiting.'

Do I go back? Back to that smell again, the garbage heap, left from the hospital dump, twenty steps straight ahead, then jump over the slimy green glittering stream of diamonds and sewage. Turn right. A year! They could not have survived; I knew where the best garbage was to be picked, I was responsible. What did they eat? Who protected them? Is this an opportunity? I am injured; I will need money, I will need a house, food, clothes, school, my family. . . .

'I don't know my name. I don't know where I live.' Land of opportunity, I can see the Quaid's mausoleum in the distance. Yes, this is what destiny is. 'Help! Where am I? I don't know. . . .' Ahmed the Merchant of Kolachi, not a dream anymore.



*Bi-Iznillah*

ZAHRA NAZIM

We were in Karachi for shopping for my Maamoo's wedding and so he had no option but to be our chauffeur. He was visiting Pakistan from London for his wedding. My mother, my younger sister, and I were with him in his van. Within a five minutes time span, our van was engulfed in bullets which seemed to be coming from all directions. None of us knew our way around the streets of Karachi. My mother tucked me and my sister at her feet under the glove compartment and bent over all of us trying to shield us. Maamoo was trying to swerve the car to avoid us being hit. I could only hear bullets and screeches of our car's tyres. One bullet had hit our windscreen and the glass shattered on to us.

I do not remember for how long the episode lasted. I only recall our van coming to a halt. My mother pulled us out of the pickup and hysterically checked us for any injuries. We had reached a friend's house and his wife combed the pieces out of our hair using a lice comb. I was the only one who miraculously escaped any bruises. This incident took place in the summer of 1987. Only one question kept on coming to my mind whenever I reflected on this incident. Why am I alive? Years of pondering led me to believe that I must be alive for a reason. There is something that only I was destined to do. Little did I know, that later in 2010, after twenty-three years I would once again come to Karachi, this time for an indefinite period of time and I would get an answer.

One day my husband returned home followed by a brigade of calls from family members inquiring about his safety. He had escaped from a bomb blast by just a minute. Oh dear! Now please stop moaning over YOUR decision of us moving to Karachi. Every time something happened in the city, I had to go through such a session with my husband. I had never imagined that I would be the one calming him down so frequently, just based on faith about life and death as well as '*Bi-iznillah*'. This is a Quranic concept that I could not have understood had I not been to Karachi. Living in an unpredictable law and order situation of Karachi as well as my childhood anecdote both led to my better comprehension of the following Ayahs of Surah Al-e-Imran that I was reciting one day. This was not the first time that I was reading the Holy Quran with its translation; it was a habit. But only being in Karachi sensitized me to their practical meaning: 'No soul can ever die except by Allah's decree\* and at a term appointed.' (*Surah Āli Imran: 3:145*). 'Say: Even though ye had been in your houses, those appointed to be slain would have gone forth to the placed where they were to die.' (*Surah Āli Imran: 3:154*).

Today, while I am penning my thoughts down, I am still residing in Karachi, fearless, despite the pressure of near and dear family members, siblings, and parents to leave this city.

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\* The Arabic word is '*Bi-Iznillah*'.

*Karachi:*  
*Destiny and Hope of a Muhajir*

ZARENA OSMANI JABBAR

Karachi was a city which this Afghan had only heard stories of as a youngster. It was a hot summer morning of June 1984. All I remember from that journey were the nauseating bumpy rides on unpaved and dirt-filled roads, crammed into a tightly-filled Suzuki wagon with so many strangers. On that bumpy ride, I filled my thoughts with good memories. My family thought they were only going to visit Karachi so that Babo, my grandmother could reunite with her son who was coming to visit from America. Once in Karachi, after a long journey of many trials, we stayed with Babo's cousin in his two-bedroom flat. Although space was tight, the husband and wife were very hospitable and welcoming to my family. Shortly after our arrival, Uncle Zahir made it to Karachi.

That night we sat next to our beloved uncle; Rona at one side and I on the other side. To our dismay, the lights were out, yet again. Later, I found out that this was the norm in Karachi. Asiba, the wife, brought out the kerosene lanterns to set at the centre of the eating mat. Mother jumped up to open all the windows in hopes that some kind of wind would blow into the sitting area. There is nothing like eating with a close-knit family, sharing stories and jokes around a flickering kerosene lantern in the dark. Once the meal was done and the eating area cleared, all jokes and stories came to an end. My uncle's tone changed from chirpy and upbeat to a more serious, stern tone. He looked up at his mother,



sitting across from him. Babo was a deep and spiritual person and at that moment she sensed what was coming. Zahir didn't notice Babo's emotions; he continued and reminded her of the dangers in our homeland. He begged and pleaded with his mother and sister to stay in Karachi, 'I can't bear to hear any more bad news of a family member being sacrificed in this senseless war.' Zahir vowed to support us financially for as long as we stayed.

That night was filled with deep reflections and thoughts. We all retired to bed early. I laid there looking out into the still sky that was covered by bright shining stars, wondering what was next for us. I didn't understand what to make of the serious conversation that took place but I knew that life for me was going to take a dramatic shift. I said my prayers and asked Allah to make whatever He had in store for us easy. The next day, the decision was made that we would all stay and start a new life in Karachi.

Never did I think that Uncle Zahir—this tall, handsome and proud looking man—would be the reason that my life would change forever. It was there in Maymar and then in Johar Square that I got introduced to what really Pakistan, and Karachi, was all about. Our new home was so different from what I remembered in Afghanistan. There was no yard to play in but I loved that I lived so high up; on the fifth storey in the complex, so much closer to the sky and away from earth, I thought. I looked out from our balcony and thought the people down below were little ants. I imagined how I was their queen directing their patterned movements; eventually it became a dizzying scene. I would walk up to the roof garden and feel even closer to the beaming sun or the shining stars at night. Roof gardens were my escape, but they also served as sanctuaries for the youngsters and elders alike. During the day we would run wild with other young girls up there without the prying eyes of parents or other adults. When it rained

my friends and I ran up to the roof garden where we danced with the raindrops, sang Bollywood melodies matching the rhythm of the downpour or trickle, and then sit and take in the sandalwood-like scent that the rain would leave behind. It was during those moments when I realized why the *mitti* of one's country had so much value to a native. The smell of dirt stays in the senses forever. I connect the scents and smells of my young life to my identity; those memories bring inner equanimity in times of tribulation. My childhood memories were formed in Karachi, a destination, yet an embarking point into the many experiences I would face ahead.

In 1990 when I migrated to America, where I faced challenges after challenges, my thoughts escaped to those wonderful days with my little friends, the bustling street vendors and that sweet smell of earth after a downpour of rain. I would remember the peaceful full moon nights when my family and I would go up to the roof garden. Kochi laid out cushions and rugs and I would help lay out dinner and tea for everyone. The adults would retire to bed early but we youngsters would stay around late into the night, staring at the stars in the dark sky, sharing stories and jokes until the dim kerosene lantern went out.

During the day everyone happily tended to their normal lives of going to school, work or just hanging out in the local market with friends sipping *chai*. At night, street vendors poured into the streets blasting fun Bollywood tunes, families would go out to get ice-cream or stroll around without purpose, enjoying life. During those warm summer and spring nights I would grab Rona by the hand, slowly sneak out of the house while my mother and grandmother lay in bed, then rush down to the streets praying that we wouldn't get caught. My heart would beat hard as we made our way down the dark staircase into the streets. But I didn't care much for the fear, I had stashed away and saved up my



allowance for these mini adventures and would combine it with Rona's allowance to make the night eventful. We would run from vendor to vendor, purchasing a cup of Chinese egg drop soup then rush over to the *jalebi* stand and gobble the sweet, golden crunchy treats before we would rush back up the long windy dark staircase. On our way back to the house, I would make Rona swear and warn her, 'Mohr and Babo had better not find out.' Luckily, we would find Mohr and Babo still lying there asleep when we returned from our mini adventure.

While growing up in Karachi, these little moments, experiences, fun-filled childhood memories moulded my identity. Karachi proved to be a city that was a sanctuary for me, full of pride, love, and hope, and it was an escape for me in my young years. The memories will forever be cherished and each time I return to the city, it will reawaken my senses of the journeys I took while growing up there. It was a stepping stone to what lay ahead for me and therefore it was the beginning of my destiny as a *muhajir* wherever I went.



## *In The Shadow of Death*

SHAKIR SIDDIQUI

On 24 July 2011, fifteen people were killed and more than sixty people were seriously injured in different parts of Karachi. Major hospitals announced an emergency and government officials took notice of this current bloody wave of ethnic violence. Rangers followed the orders of government to shoot at sight. Yet, unknown gun men wandered freely everywhere without anyone stopping them. The police and rangers failed to provide the shelter of peace to the people of Karachi.

At my house in Sukkur, there was a sudden rattling at my door. I opened it and saw my Uncle Hafeez who had just returned from Karachi. I took his bags and greeted him. After dinner, he gave me firsthand information regarding the violence in Karachi.

That night my uncle had a serious heart attack. I rushed him to the Civil Hospital emergency room. But after a long struggle, the doctors advised us to move him to a private hospital in Karachi, because the panel of doctors who examined the report of the CT scan could see a brain haemorrhage. There was only a minor chance of survival for such patients. It was a disturbing night. I did not sleep even a wink.

Uncle Siraj, who was Uncle Hafeez's elder brother, got in touch with our friends Mr Inam and his wife in Karachi, to help us make arrangements at the Aga Khan Hospital.

Uncle Siraj, Uncle Zia, and I left for Karachi by road in an ambulance. My family members and other relatives cautioned us about the bloody riots in Karachi. They all were praying for our safe journey to Karachi. We started our journey tormented by the situation in Karachi; we knew there was panic and fighting in the streets. Throughout the journey, Uncle Hafeez's critical condition created fear in our minds: either we would succeed in getting him to Karachi in time, or during the course of our journey Uncle Hafeez would take the last breath of his life.

Those moments are unforgettable for me and throughout the journey that night I recalled my childhood days with my uncle. He always accompanied us on picnics and he was so much fun to be with. All my past experiences were filled with good memories of him. Uncle Siraj comforted me that *Inshallah* he would recover and return on his own feet from Karachi. The three of us prayed for him throughout that journey to Karachi. Our driver was from Quetta and said that within half an hour we would reach Aga Khan Hospital. Meanwhile the messages of unrest and panic were continuously being received on our mobiles regarding the tension in Karachi. These messages portrayed the horrible news about the situation in Karachi. Finally, after a long journey our ambulance, blaring its emergency siren, reached the gate of Aga Khan Hospital. Every corner of the city was burning. Our driver had skilfully chosen the safest routes and dropped us inside the front gate. The emergency staff rushed Uncle Hafeez into the ward; all the doctors there did a great job for his treatment.

The staff advised us to wait in the waiting room, where on TV, we were surprised to see the news that thirty people had been killed and many others had been seriously injured within a few hours. I saw the sea of doctors and staff working day and night for the treatment of human beings. I wandered



around the hospital seeing that everyone wanted to serve the patients without thinking about different nations and races. I thought to myself that these people, belonging to different casts and tribes, were all first and foremost doctors, who worked with their hearts and souls without thinking of differences. But who were those people outside of this hospital, who are seriously injuring others without compassion, without any feeling of pain? I saw a lot of injured young people who lingered between life and death and their old parents screaming and crying to see their loved ones in such a critical condition. My heart was really lamenting for these innocent people.

One week later, God showed His miracle and Uncle Hafeez opened his eyes. Dr Khan said that his health was now stable. We decided to rent an ambulance to take him back to Sukkur. At last, the dark night was over and the new sun of hope arose for us, as we prepared to return. We were in the ambulance, all of us, when all of sudden we heard the sound of heavy firing and our ambulance lost its balance. Bullets were hitting the ambulance. We all started crying and shouting because we all were badly injured and then we were back at Aga Khan Hospital and in the emergency room.

After a few days I awoke from a deep sleep and I found myself on the same hospital bed where Uncle Hafeez had once been. I shouted, I cried. Where was I? Where were my uncles? My friends and my parents seized my hands. It was a great tragedy, said Dr Khan, that we cured Hafeez after great efforts but lost him to bullets, and that along with Hafeez, all these innocent people had also lost their lives. Dr Khan embraced me and said that it was the will of God that everyone had been killed except me. I felt grave pain and lost consciousness and fell back on the bed.



## *Science or Commerce*

AYESHA ASIM

'This is it.' thought Samreen. With a firm resolution, she ticked the boxes for the science subjects of her choice—biology, chemistry, and physics. She had decided on opting for Pre-medical, not that she in any way intended to be a doctor. Ever since the results of her matriculation examination were announced, it had been one big hell for Samreen. Samreen scored a total of sixty-eight per cent in her board examination which were a pure embarrassment for her family. No one in her family had ever scored so low. Her elder sister had always achieved good marks. She belonged to one of those families for whom education is their oxygen. Their children's high grades were what they lived for and anyone who mistakenly scored low was looked down upon and was a symbol of disgust. According to her father she didn't deserve to go to a private college and he was not going to spend his hard-earned money on a careless and duffer child. So now, for the first time in her life, she would be entering a public institution. Her interest in music came back to her. Her forms were submitted to the colleges and she got into a government college for women somewhere near Federal B. Area.

Three weeks later, she was up early in the morning at 6 a.m. She said her prayers and prayed for a better year and cried a little over what had befallen her. She got ready in her new stark white, stiff college uniform. Her father dropped her at the bus stop. The car ride was full of the expected lecture from her father: How to keep her head down; don't mix with

the wrong crowd; don't get into any political group; don't get into any of the teachers' bad books; don't be too prominent but don't stay too dumb either, etc. In short a lot of 'don'ts' and almost no 'do's'. After this real bumpy ride, Samreen got onto the bus hoping for a more peaceful ride than in her father's car.

Once on the bus she got a seat, and tucked her headphones safely in her ears. She stared out at the morning traffic so she wouldn't have to look at freaky old men staring hungrily at her from the men's compartment. Then her eyes met a boy's, maybe a little older than her with dark eyes, dark hair and a rough face, pointing a gun at her. All the other passengers were giving her scared looks. The lyrics of the song, her father's words, and her own thoughts all were a haze and a blur in her mind. Her father was telling her to keep her head down, she didn't seem to want to; her hands started working without even her knowing about it. Slowly she reached for her mobile phone which was in her pocket. The boy was getting anxious and was waving the gun in front of her face more obstinately. Impatiently, he reached for her cell. She clutched it tightly. He shook her hand to wrench the mobile from her but she didn't let go of it. He yelled at her to give it up in a very squeaky voice. She became more resolute with her father's words pounding in her brain, 'Keep your head down.' The boy shouted, 'Take this, bitch!' and pulled the trigger. There was an ear-splitting sound of the gunshot and then the boy ran from the bus. The bullet pierced her heart; there was the stain of red blood forming on the front of her uniform. Samreen slouched back in her seat, her head dropped back on the rod fixed to the window. Her headphones were still in her ears, blasting out the words of her favourite song.

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*Dreamers*

HADIA CHAGHTAI

They lifted us up on their shoulders, up above the whole rejoicing crowd, so that the whole world could catch a glimpse of their heroes.

‘Hello, girl, it’s closing time. You’d better pack your things and get going. It’s getting late and by the way, who sits in the library for such a long time?’ came the librarian’s voice.

‘Oh, sorry, Uncle. I didn’t notice the time. I’ll be leaving now,’ I replied.

‘Daydreaming again, eh? As usual?’ the elderly man teased me. ‘Dreamers of the day are dangerous people, for they may act their dreams with open eyes to make them possible.’

‘I dream because only I can be the change I wish to see in the world,’ I repeated the age old proverb and smiled.

‘God help me. I’ve had your grandfather and your father study in this library and believe me you’re no different from them. All of you are mad people; dreamers and eternal optimists. You’ll go far, my girl, you’ll go far,’ he laughed as I walked out of the library.

Hussain Uncle had been running this library for fifty years now and he still hadn’t gotten tired of it. The sole reason that he kept going was that if he hadn’t had a place to study and learn, others shouldn’t be deprived of the opportunity too. I came to the library everyday—my escape—and spent half

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the day there, losing myself in books. I was used to hearing such comments from him everyday. Thanking God for such fantastic blessings, I walked over to the bus stop and as usual saw a huge number of people, waiting to get on the next bus. The best part was that they had formed a line today. Smiling to myself, I headed towards the end of the line. Two weeks ago, I had started asking the people to form a line as they waited. I met with criticisms, shocked looks, and one woman even labelled me as 'one of those dreamers, thinking they can change this city and ultimately the world for the better'. By her face, I assumed that she expected an angry comeback but with the sweetest smile, I quoted from one of the books in the library, which I whole-heartedly believed in. 'Ma'am, the ones who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who really do.' Savouring the expression on her made-up face, I climbed aboard.

This time when I saw her, she herself was in the queue, instructing others to do so too. It filled me with joy that my constant pushing had paid off. I remembered what my grandfather taught me: Do what is right. Don't be afraid of rejection or don't fear being made fun of. Follow your heart, because you'll be damned if you do and you'll be damned if you don't.

The bus hadn't come yet and most people were groaning and moaning, when I saw a streetlight come on. Looking around for the switch to turn it off, I found it on the pole. As I couldn't reach it, I asked one tall lady to help me out. At first, she gave me one of those confused looks, but then said, 'Just leave it; it's going to be dark soon. And by the way, it's not our responsibility.'

'What do you mean it's not our responsibility? It's our city, so it is our responsibility. We're just wasting electricity because we still have a good two hours till dark.'



At this she laughed out loud before she reached up to turn off the light. 'Sister, you still believe that this city has a future? Nothing's going to change. What has this city given us, that you're so hell-bent on saving it?' I opened my mouth to retort but shut it thinking it would be better to keep quiet and one by one we ascended the colourfully decorated bus. In a bad mood already, I reached home and dragged myself to the door. As I entered, I heard my mom calling me. Judging by the level of noise, I assumed it was my aunt with her army of kids. Entering the lounge, I saw I was right.

'I came to meet your mother, to say goodbye,' she replied. 'We're going to Islamabad tomorrow from where we'll leave for America. We're moving, permanently.'

'Moving? Why?' I asked amazed.

'Look, *beta*. Karachi isn't just right anymore. This city is going to the dumps and so is the rest of the country. There's nothing left here. It's just a city after all. There aren't any more Quaid-i-Azams who can save us. All the heroes are dead. No one can change this bloody city.'

'But . . . but . . . Quaid-i-Azam gave us this country, this city, to cherish and to protect. You're going to leave just like that?' I asked hysterically.

Before I could explode, Mom ordered me to go to my room and study. Reluctantly, I stomped towards my room but my aunt's words 'It's just a city, after all' kept ringing in my ears. Dumping my stuff on the bed, I plopped onto the floor, with my head in my hands. My aunt's departure didn't trouble me as much as did her reasoning for leaving. I thought of the quote from a prominent journalist: 'Why is it so unloved when it embraces all?'

Suddenly, my phone started to ring. It was my friend, Sundus. 'Hello?' I said.

‘Hey, listen up, girl! I’ve got good news for you. Guess what?’ she chirped.

‘Ummm . . . your dad agreed to get you a car?’ I made a wild guess.

‘No. Remember the posters we made for that competition at the university?’ enquired Sundus. ‘Well, you and I tied for first place. You know Mehwish? Her dad was a judge and she just called to tell me that we won! She told me that the judges liked our ideas about saving Karachi, so much that they’re gonna use them for their campaign next month and we’re going to get special awards,’ she shrieked euphorically.

‘YAAAAAY!’ I screamed into the phone. My happiness knew no bounds. The posters would, at least, make others understand something beyond themselves. And even if one person started to care for Karachi with just the vigour with which we curse it, my work would be done. After all, it is true that one spark starts a fire.

Grinning, I gazed out the window to see the ink-black sky strewn with stars and the jewel-like glittering view of Karachi, the city that came to life at night.

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## *Deyhatan*

JESMIN SAFDAR

On seeing me for the very first time as a girl of thirteen, with two braids and a simple umbrella frock, my fiancé had told his mother, '*Yeh to bilkul deyhatan hai!* (She's a peasant!)

Six years later, when we finally met in the family court he was heard saying, 'Jesmin does what she intends to do.'

'Yes,' I said to the Magistrate. What I had done for my family, by staying with my parents and by helping my brother with his studies, was appreciated by my husband. In recognition, I am given this divorce certificate.

*'Yehi kaam jab eik larka karta hai to farmabardar, khidmatguzar kaha jata hai.'* What was my fault? Only that I had refused to leave my parents until my only brother could stand on his own feet? I had refused matrimonial obligation before I would turn 18. I had asked both my parents and in-laws to let me continue my studies, promising them that I would pay for my studies.

This is my life story. In the late sixties, we did not have much exposure to the outside world. We finally got a black and white TV in the early 70s. I still remember walking through the narrow lanes of Burns Road as we lived just across S.M. Law College. Morning time was fun, watching students flooding the streets as there were several other colleges in the vicinity too. My mom, dad, brother, and I stayed happily in Shafqat House, a three-bedroom apartment bought against a *pagree*. The walls were painted a dark green with blue borders

and the mosaic floor resembled a chess board. My father, who was posted as Second Officer at a Jodia Bazar bank branch then, would walk home daily with groceries and other things, as my mom never stepped into the Burns Road bazaar, which according to our friends was heaven because of what could be bought there from fruits to veggies to *dahi-balles* to *firnis*. Papa was a simple matriculate, a migrant from Mumbai, India. One day, my uncle and aunt walked into our house with a box of sweets from Fresco. It was for my *rishta*. As Papa entered the house we could sense a pulled down face, as that day, out of the blue, he had had an argument with his boss and had resigned. While mother was on cloud nine, Papa contemplated how he would manage in the future.

Most Fridays, after school, I would join mom who used to have her afternoon tea on the balcony. Adjacent to ours was the balcony of a Memon family, whose married daughter Bilquis would visit her parents on weekends. I still remember how she would talk about the latest movies that she had seen which she called '*filum*'. Not only dialogues, even the songs and dresses were discussed in detail. At times, Saturdays were spent watching Urdu movies in the cinema halls Bambino and Scala, and later Naz, Nishat, Khayyam, and others. Later these cinemas houses in Karachi were turned into shopping plazas. Papa preferred the 6-to-9 slot for movies. Mostly bookings were made a week ahead. We would wait impatiently for the week to go by so that we could go to the movies.

I told my parents I would leave school and sit for my Matric exam as a private candidate the same year, skipping class 8. My *rishta* had given me four years before my marriage so that I may graduate and my brother could also complete his schooling. Soon came the day when I gave my last Matric paper. I had taken ten subjects in a row, with some help from a lady teacher. Papa was now reinstated, he was promoted to Manager, and was given a car. We shifted to Depot Lines,

next to my school, which now was called Nasra School. Things had started to fall in place, the new apartments were spacious, and now we had a fridge and also a black and white TV.

I enrolled at the APWA centre to learn cutting and stitching in the afternoon, while my mornings were spent in a beautician course. In our neighbourhood, girls older than me still studied or worked. Half of them were working in one office or another and the rest taught in schools or were librarians in some colleges. Till then, I never knew such jobs existed. At the parlour I learnt that running a salon was like minting money.

I was sensible enough to know that a life partner needs to be loyal, compatible, and financially stable. I wanted to be independent and break this shackle of marriage. Finally we separated. I returned to my parents' house to complete my diploma in the beautician course, affiliated with School of Beauticians, London while simultaneously sitting for my BA exam.

I also started teaching at Nasra School in the mornings, while contributing articles on hair and beauty to the Sunday editions of English and Gujrati newspapers. An Urdu daily went a step ahead and assigned me the editorship of the women's page on Fridays.

I had a vision of opening a salon and maintaining a good clientele. The very first thing I did was that instead of going for any rented place, I opted for using a room at my own apartment. Not only rent and commuting fare were saved, but my clients found it safer to come to a house instead of a shop. Luckily, the owner of two parlours at that time wanted to close down her newly-opened business after only six months, and hence I was able to purchase all the slimming equipment from her which she had got from London. I



had to borrow money from my father. I had started on 2 December and on the night of the 31st, my mom counted the five thousand rupees which I returned to my Papa. And it's anybody's guess how happy and relieved they were and how many tears—*khushee ke ansoo*—were shed. Now around four decades down the line, when I look back I wonder: had it not been for my exposure to people around, would I have been able to learn so many crafts? If it had not been for my father who gave me his confidence, trust, and a loan to move ahead in life, would I have had Jesmin Beauty Parlour in the mid-70s, where scores of women came for beauty treatment?

# Colours

SAIRA OWAIS ADIL

Everything is colourful! Colours add wonder and invite all of us to ponder life experiences with every passing day—the blue soothing sky, the brown in dirt, the yellow that announces a new and shiny day, green that alleviates the fatigued nerves, grey that holds mystery, pink for love and life! And so the language of colours goes on. Probably for much better shades of life did my parents decide to leave Karachi and move abroad.

But from the minute that we boarded the plane, even the clouds in the blue sky kept changing shades for us. Our ‘green’ passport and our nationality counted a lot. And of course the ‘birth place’ meant a lot in all the official proceedings in our new surroundings. At school, the local children called us ‘*batoore*’, that meant strangers or foreigners in the local African language Hausa. In markets, every native thought us an ‘alien’ and watched us in a strange manner that of course was very irritating. The local boys called out to tease me, ‘My wife, my wife!’, thus making our lives extremely difficult and also clearly signifying that we were definitely different from them! My young mind thought how easy it was for my mom to give birth to me in her own city and how difficult it would have been for her if I had been born years later in this foreign land, as even after living there for ten years, a whole decade, we were still expatriates! I started valuing peace of mind from the very basic years of my life and was never comfortable in that foreign atmosphere.

I heard a news story in which a plane was hijacked. It was a European plane. My young mind of merely five years of age related the situation in Karachi, as I had heard from my dad earlier, with the hijacked plane. As the newscaster read the update about the unmet cruel demands of the hijackers and how they had started throwing dead bodies of passengers from the plane, I started connecting the events with the brutal bloodshed in my city, Karachi. I remember my parents holding their breaths and wiping their tears. It was pain for the innocent lives lost and at that time they too must have been thinking of their relatives living in a distant continent. They must have thought about the helplessness of those victims too.

The next day, the teachers at school also discussed the 'hijacking story' and asked us to write our sentiments. I wrote about the pain that I had felt, the fear that I had seen on the TV screen the previous day, and the grief along with immense terror that I had seen in the eyes of the victims' relatives. My words, I felt, had an intensity of sentiments. The teacher called me in; she wanted to know how I had managed to create such a vivid picture of emotion.

'I belong to a city that has been hijacked by evil too! Every day I see my parents weeping in their prayers for the betterment of the situation there and for the safety of their loved ones. Our people are mercilessly killed each day in order to meet the hijackers' heinous demands. No one could feel the grief of the relatives of those on board with more intensity than me. I am a daily victim of emotional hijacking.'

Then fate brought us back to Karachi once again and this time we were here to settle down for good. It was definitely the inviting yellow sunshine that must have had shown hope to us. Or the blue sea that must have had assured us about a 'living'. Whatever it was, the decision was made, keeping all the prevailing threats out of our minds. Very soon we also got



attuned to the ever-changing shades of Karachi. With passing years, even I started to see the black ink of the newspaper as red drops dripping off it! The blue sea gradually seemed a complex blend of brown and grey shades—nothing natural; everything ruined! The dwellers of my city were deprived of the basic necessities of life—each day seemed to be adding ‘misery’ to my people!

The growing ‘darkness’ in the city provoked my pen to protest. I wanted to lighten up the face of my dear city. The first ever article that I wrote was about colours. I urged the inhabitants of Karachi to bring ‘artificial freshness’ to the city. I wanted them to paint their homes, offices etc. in refreshing wall colours, so as to assure at least one pleasant sight for the people! I wore red to celebrate the biggest day ever of my life! The colour did not remind me of any dread that I had always associated it with. It means colour is seen in the light the viewer really wants to focus on, I thought. I thought of the doctor and nurses who helped me when I was in pain. No one was bothered about my ethnic background, they just helped! It was an eye opener too; I had by now learnt that the brutal thorns of ethnicity could also be curbed with a pleasant and sensitive attitude.

I too fear the uncertainty in the environment and remain restless until my children and husband arrive home safely each day. But with each new day, I try to focus on new resolutions in life. Though it is extremely difficult as my precious lives—my husband and children—daily join the flowing stream of this city, to compete and make a place in this world. At times I ask myself: where did I get the courage that enables me to move further and why do I actually want to see my family living in this society? Why don’t I move abroad? If other cities of Pakistan are better, why don’t I move there? Am I being negligent towards the safety of my kids or careless about their

future? I keep pondering for hours but the reply that I get from within myself is: Trust this land!

I now hold the pen to make people realize that in this city things are not always bad! I want people to believe that the worst would only be overruled by the 'better' in us! This faith in ourselves is the only thing which will help us move ahead. . . . We have been and always will be mixing different shades in our society for the betterment of all. And that is what the real story of Karachi is all about.

## *'Krunchy Aloo Chaat'*

ANEESA JADOON

I was four when I came to Karachi from Abbottabad, and now, when I look back through all those years, I realize that many things have changed in my city of lights. I remember when I came here, every little thing for me was an amusement, every person was an alien being, every bird was the magic of nature, and every day spent here was a wonderful experience. I can still laugh at my reaction to all the strange things that never happened back home, up north. Coming from high mountains, the high-rise buildings looked equally adventurous and I wished to explore every tall concrete structure I saw.

We bought an apartment where every time some aunty suspended her basket down her balcony from above us, we would hold it, stuff it with our own toys and start playing, and not let the grocer on the street below have it. And on its way back from the grocer to the aunty, well, the turnips were ours! I never laughed as hard as when I first saw some women wearing knee-length dresses, I thought that these women did not have their own clothes and were wearing their children's dresses.

It was so much fun back in Karachi in those days as compared to up north. One thing about Karachi that I still enjoy is the way most Karachites pronounce the name of their home city. Some people take delight in calling it 'Kayrachi', while some call it 'Karanchi', or 'Keerachi'. . . . Doesn't this sound like an old creaking chair?



The most mouth-watering version of the word ‘Karachi’ was our very own ‘Krunchy’, that reminds me of *aloo chaat* with loads of lemon and a sweetness topped with the special crunch. Well, in a way Karachi does make me feel like living the life of *aloo chaat*. Despite its spicy, crunchy bite, we still don’t fail to notice the somewhat sweet taste of its ingredients. We enjoy the taste of it. I even enjoy taking a bite out of my Karachi every day. Waking up to the Karachi mornings is like riding a rollercoaster. It is the second most daring thing to do every day, which is incomplete without attempting the first dare, that is, to sleep at night! Oh my God, with all the bikes and rickshaws under my balcony, a dog barking wildly some place far away, a furiously purring cat, and the TVs and radios being played until morning at full volume, he who sleeps soundly is a man of great patience and courage.

The morning call is as melodious as the previous night’s lullaby. You are awakened this time by cats purring at the howling dogs, school vans honking at your door, a window smashed by a naughty hawker with too strong a throwing arm, and you are almost at the verge of death owing to the smoke and pollution. In addition, when you wake up you will be glad to find that you have to spend half of the day on your way to work at your second home in Karachi: the roads. Well, the day goes on. However, all this, for those who believe that Karachi is their mother, is a rhythm of a revolution which is still to come. Even though it will show up very late, but it will change the future of Pakistan. The revolution is sure to begin from our very own Karachi. The energy for this lies within the hearts of Karachiites. No matter how much someone tries to weaken our confidence by dividing us, killing us or creating biases, at the end of the day we are the off springs and adoptions of one very encouraging mother—who is this city itself, Karachi. And we never lose hope and we never like to share our plate of *aloo chaat* with any troublemaker.

## *Selected Diary Pages of an IDP*

AMJAD LARIK

Dear life! I wish I could have spent you well . . . it's not my fault! I don't know who should be blamed! In the company's office, each individual is separated from the other by a wooden wall. We sit in our cubicles in front of our computers and keep entering different sort of data required by our employer. The cabins serve as blinkers so that we can work efficiently without being distracted and so we have little knowledge of our colleagues. During lunch breaks we only share smiles and get back to our work as if our chairs draw us back like magnets. . . . The neighbouring cabin to mine is occupied by a girl with a veiled face. Her name is Muqadas. I looked at the attendance register to find out. For me the veil increases her grace. I am impressed. She must be from a noble family. Because of her modesty I have not dared to greet her casually as I greet other colleagues. Her eyes seem full of sleep. I often wonder why?

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There are two good things about Karachi. First, it has a beach even though it is polluted, and second, it provides refuge to all sorts of people . . . who want to hide from someone, from their scary or infamous past, or from estranged relations! Even criminals find it a suitable city . . . though this hardly is something to be proud of about the city. It has also hidden me like an infant in its mother's lap. Circumstances of my own blood-drenched region have compelled me to seek refuge in this crowded city . . . the city of lights where darkness also

prevails in other forms! It has been one and half year but my neighbours don't know about me. None of them have asked me who I am or where I am from or where I work. Everybody is busy with their own life. I sometimes like this sense of being unknown . . . but I don't know if I should be satisfied with this anonymity. I think people living around me are also attempting to hide their own lives from me.

There are extremely rich people here and in greater proportion there are extremely poor people too. And there is a constant struggle. There is a diverse middle class of workers who work two jobs to run their homes and aspire to become like those who live a luxurious life in the posh areas of this city. This city has all the qualities to send those who are have-nots into a deep sense of deprivation. The inhabitants of this city, who are about 13 million people, are not bothered about who owns this city. But whenever this question is raised by the political parties, it brings riots in its wake. And the natives of this city are missing in this phenomenon of riots for ownership.

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For last two months, a kid named Iffi greets me on the second floor of my apartment building, calling me 'Uncle' with a smile and handshakes . . . perhaps it is the only genuine delight that I have received from this city. Sometimes I bring chocolates for him. He reminds me of my nephew. . . .

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In the morning as I entered the office, the tea boy and the girl in the cabin next to mine were having an argument . . . but they suddenly became silent when I entered and I did not ask them what was going on. On the way back home, the tea boy rode the same bus as me. I tried to find out about the morning incident but he avoided it by changing the topic. He



was a typical Karachiite: loose faded pair of jeans, some weird print on his t-shirt, a wrist band, and chewing something . . . not *paan* but *gutka*, the new dangerous addiction among the youth.

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I was not happy for the past few days. . . . I wished I could run back to the mountains. . . . This city had provided me refuge but sometimes it seemed to devour me like a demon. I wondered if everyone in Karachi felt like me or was it because I didn't have a family here? I went to Sea View to amuse myself . . . this was the only entertainment I had. But once there, all the happy families, loving couples, and fun-loving gangs of youths made me even more melancholy. I wondered: was the world around me really so good and so happy? Then at work one day, I heard something shocking from my neighbouring cabin which revealed to me why those eyes were sleepy. I could not believe what I heard. She was talking to a prospective client. She entertained men! I returned to my apartment with a sense of emptiness. I had developed a sort of liking for her as she was the only lady whom I had the chance to see many times in a day, she was like a family member for me. . . . Maybe I even had more than just a liking for her.

That night I couldn't sleep. I pulled a chair to the window which opened onto a flyover that is right in front of the flats where I live. The lights of the city were turned on, as if people were afraid of the darkness. It had been few days since I had seen Iffi around the flats. I was worried for him. Was he unwell or had he gone somewhere? There wasn't no one I could ask.

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Yesterday, I saw Iffi and he told me it was his birthday. I promised to bring him a gift the next day. I gave him a teddy

bear and a box of chocolates. He was very happy to receive it. As I changed clothes and was about to lie down to rest, there was a knock on the door. A man holding the teddy bear and the box of chocolates in his hand was standing outside. He handed me back my gifts and said in a rough tone: 'Thanks, but please don't give such things to my child.' I could not say a word.

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On returning from the office, I was robbed along with other passengers on the bus. Our cell phones and our wallets were snatched from us. Three youths, who were supposed to be students, took out pistols and hijacked the bus. Now I didn't have a single penny to buy chocolates for the kid. I felt sorry about that. . . .

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Sometimes I feel a roughness has crept into me. I am losing my good self. I behave indecently. This is a gift from Karachi. Chaos, haste to reach somewhere, doing the same jobs absent-mindedly, living in a small flat makes one miserable. The freshness of faces and smiles are missing. When I board a bus, I see my co-passengers in deep thought as if they have lost something, but they don't know what that is! It is too noisy here. Deafening almost. How can one behave sanely? It unnerves people and they lose their 'self' perhaps. Walking along the beach I saw a bunch of youths who were teasing a lady. I interfered and the guys disappeared. She thanked me and offered me a cup of tea. We went to a nearby restaurant and chatted like friends. She was a divorcee and I felt she was in distress. On finding out I have not seen the whole of Karachi, she took me with her for a long drive. I saw a new side of Karachi. We went to a shopping mall. I was astonished to see indigenous people living a foreign lifestyle in foreign dresses. At the end I was surprised by her invitation to go

with her to her place but I politely refused as it was midnight by then.

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Today, a member of a political party was killed. As a result, the situation worsened; eight people were killed, dozens were injured, and 35 vehicles were burnt. This is another side of vibrant Karachi. The situation back home is also worsening day by day. I don't think it will see peace any time soon. Despite two unanimous resolutions, drone attacks are still going on, killing civilians. The Parliament considers it against our sovereignty, but there is no let-up. I am worried for my brother and his family.

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The last seven days have been devastating and humiliating. I was accused of kidnapping and was locked up. Seven days ago on returning from the office I was greeted by the police at the flat. Iffi's father pointed at me: 'This is the man! Arrest him!'

Before I could comprehend anything, he caught me by the collar and shouted, 'Where is my son? Where is Iffi?' I was too numb to react. The police caught and handcuffed me.

At the police station I came to know the boy was missing since that morning. I was worried myself: where he could be? I tried my level best to assure them it was not me who had done it but in vain. A policeman remarked, 'You people come here for doing all sorts of illegal activities. Tell us the truth, otherwise be ready for severe torture. We will get the truth out of you!'

What was it that I could have told them? I was shocked to the core by witnessing even more degrading scenes in the police station.



On the second day of my arrest, Iffi was recovered and the culprit was no other than his own uncle who had kidnapped him because he knew his brother had sold a plot of land and had 10 lac rupees with him. I was released. I went to the polluted waters of sea . . . the sun had set. The darkness reigned.

## *The Question of Karachi from Here*

DAUD MALIK

'Dada-jee, who is killing people in Karachi?' I asked in April 1986 in Rawalpindi. In perpetual retirement since 1952, reading *Jang* was one of Dada-jee's morning routines. A charpoy along with a plump pillow would be placed outside the home in the unkempt garden, knowing he liked to have his tea and newspaper in the open. I was his companion every morning, trying to make sense out of headlines and black and white pictures.

Dada-jee didn't answer. He looked at me as if I had asked something forbidden. But he was not angry, perhaps slightly surprised. Why should his grandson, who had just started making sense of words, ask such a question? Dada-jee was strictly apolitical, or in other words, he was living in the past, without a care for the present. He used to dazzle us with couplet after couplet from his repertoire of Urdu and Persian poetry, peppering them with anecdotes. The moment somebody talked about politics, Dada-jee would disappear, become nobody. Karachi continued to burn, as every newspaper screamed out with the number of deaths and loss to property, accompanied by the lament that an Islamic country shouldn't witness such 'barbarity'. The newspapers also lamented that the city of Jinnah sahib (as Dada-jee would always call him) had been divided under a conspiracy by outside forces. In Rawalpindi, people would tell terrifying stories of torture. I would not believe them.

I grew up. I cleared the traditional educational hurdles. Karachi went off the radar. Violence in the biggest city became part of life, a routine like reading a newspaper, with no questions asked about it. When I got a job in trying to improve the news in a newspaper, Karachi returned to my daily life. I looked for all the news about Karachi. I discovered it was not the city of gore only. Steeped in history, it was also the city of business, of art and literature, and of the sea and beach.

Time moved on. I got married. Only when the demands of feeding and bringing up the family consisting of a wife and two sons became clear, I realized I needed to do more. I started looking for more work, other than that of being a sub-editor. More work in the day left little time to think and ponder over what was happening around me, let alone in Karachi. As I started earning more, my family life became stable and settled. My sons turned out to be much better students than I was. With earning more and more money becoming my aim, I felt I was becoming apolitical, just like Dada-jee.

I am not worried about Karachi anymore. My worries now revolve around the well-being of my two sons, their education, and what the future holds for them in this country. But Karachi refuses to go away. As I came home late one evening, my older son opened the gate. Before I could get out of the car and hand him the laptop, he said, 'Baba, come upstairs quickly!'

'Baba, look,' he said pointing at the TV screen. Shots of young men with guns, amid sounds of gunshots, and newscasters wailing their commentary, it looked like a scene from an absurd play.



‘The financial hub of Pakistan burns again. But come with me and watch, who is behind this game of death?’ the newscaster cried.

‘Switch it off,’ I snapped.

‘Baba, who is killing people in Karachi?’

## *In Broken Images*

AIMEN NADEEM

His skilful hands strung together roses and lilies, piercing through them with a thin steel wire, into beautiful floral bracelets of five roses and eight lilies each. Rehan had already made some seven such bracelets and thirteen more were to be made. Anyone watching him would have enjoyed seeing him work the delicate flowers into a final ring and would have admired the beauty of Rehan's hands. His fingers were long and his nails were neat. In fact, Rehan himself was very different from all the children in his neighbourhood. Most of them wore untidy clothes, their hands and feet were dirty, but Rehan would take great pains to keep his clothes neat even while he was out on the street selling his floral bracelets. Rehan was fourteen with a heart brimming with seemingly impossible desires and eyes concealing some really big dreams.

Only two floral bracelets had been sold as Rehan continued to make his way deftly between the cars persuading people to buy his *gajray*. The heat was scorching and the air breezeless. At noon in June, the people of Karachi were more interested in reaching their destinations than in Rehan's floral bracelets. Frustrated, dejected, and numbed in his capacity to think, he moved towards a tree to sit for a while in its shade. He felt the sun and the shade were the same or maybe he had ruled out any possibility of finding a change in his circumstances. Life was losing its meaning for Rehan and he knew it. At 2 p.m. he reported at Azam's Car Workshop and immediately started fixing a cycle. The hammering and pounding in the car workshop was battering his senses. Earlier, he had always

enjoyed his work whether it was making *gajray* or fixing cycles and motorbikes at Azam's garage. But ever since he had seen those wealthy boys with fresh skins and mobile phones in a car as he sold them his *gajray*, his peace of mind was lost. He was not happy with himself and would rebuke himself from time to time.

He was on his way home after selling some *gajray* and finishing his tasks at the workshop. He sat down on the edge of the pavement, resting his head on his knees, and started weeping silently. Tears rolled down his cheeks washing some of the dirt off his face and the grime off his mind. It was for the first time that he did not wash before leaving the workshop. He felt it made no difference even if he washed off all that grease and black spots. He would remain a slum boy; an unwanted, random boy in that big city his friends called 'Kalachi' but he would insist on calling it 'Karachi'.

School! Ah! It was the first and the last place he ever loved in his life. But he was a boy whose father died of hepatitis and whose mother was an illiterate woman who washed clothes in people's houses, so he had to leave the school to earn his bread at the age of twelve. Since then, he had managed to satisfy his thirst for knowledge by reading some really good books in Urdu. He used to borrow them from an old man who lived in a library. He would save money to pay the bus fare to get there and acquire some books from this 'uncle' absolutely free of charge. It was almost like a luxurious feast for him; a pleasure which the best foods of Karachi could not provide. But now he hated himself for taking such extra pains only for a book!

Darkness was deep and the traffic scarce on the road in front of him. He had been sitting on the pavement for almost an hour and a half. He was crying but knew not why. He felt tormented because he did not know what was it that his heart wanted. It was not the car, the phones or the money



which those boys had but something else. What? He knew not what it was.

'I am a total fool!' he told himself. He set off for home, flinging his bag of *gajray* across his shoulder. Reaching home, he handed over three hundred and seventy-five rupees to his mother and headed towards the corner of the room where his bedding on the floor awaited him. He had abandoned eating dinner long ago, because he hated the quarrels among his siblings for *rotis* and *salan*. He had learned to feel content with the daily lunch at the car workshop. But today he was hungry. He was in anguish. 'It's just hunger,' he assured himself, placing his arms over his eyes but in his heart he knew it was not hunger. It was surely something else.

The following day was no different from the previous one, the only change being that the disharmony in his mind was even greater. He was rebuked too much by his master at the workshop and had a near escape from being hit by a car. Back in school, he was a brilliant student and fluent speaker. He had studied up to the sixth standard in a government school near his home. For Rehan, even a single word uttered or written in the premises of the school had an importance and a meaning. He used to be a different boy as he had overcome the defeatist mentality that prevailed all around him, but then an insignificant thing threw him into an emotional vortex. All of a sudden, he started looking at himself as a victim. Had there been no acute poverty, he would not have left school and one day would have become a teacher. But now he felt ashamed of his own ignorance and of the bitter realization that he would never ever be able to live his dream.

It was about after a week later while he was working in his workshop along with one of his colleagues Danish, that they both were captivated by the breaking news on TV. The news item said, 'Eleven more die in target killing in Karachi today.'

‘Cruel people!’ commented Danish, who was only ten.

‘Yes, very cruel!’ said Rehan in a suppressed voice. ‘Danish?’

‘Yes?’

‘Have you ever wanted to go to school?’ asked Rehan.

‘No,’ replied Danish.

‘Why?’

‘Because I know it would be useless.’

‘But we all need to learn.’

‘Yes, school does fascinate me but I know I cannot go there,’ said Danish.

‘Can you read or write?’

‘Hahaha! No, not even my name!’

‘You know, it’s a blessing to be able to read, because then you can read many good books,’ Rehan told Danish.

‘Hmm . . . maybe. I have never read one.’

There was a long silence. Suddenly Rehan was struck by an idea. ‘If somebody would teach you how to read, would you learn?’ enquired Rehan.

‘Somebody? Who?’

‘Me,’ said Rehan. Danish stared at Rehan.

All of sudden Rehan had become a teacher and he was extremely excited about it. He had kept all his school books safe and intact out of sheer love for them but today this act seemed to have a purpose—an important purpose. He was to teach Danish how to read and write Urdu and he found himself amazingly articulate. Both the boys would sit



underneath a streetlight in a park and would carry on their lessons after the workshop. Rehan was actually living his dream. He had learnt a lesson of forcefulness and authority from the sea and a lesson of freedom from the air. He had managed to unshackle himself from the envy and anger, and all of a sudden life had become serene and good.

It was 13 August and the next day would be a holiday because it was the Independence Day of Pakistan. Both of the boys were happy—happier at the prospect of a holiday than it being Independence Day. After they left the workshop, they decided to skip the lessons and sell some *gajray* so that they would have some extra money for the next day. They had planned to go to the beach on 14 August. Before parting, they exchanged some words.

‘You know Danish, you are my very best *jigar*,’ said Rehan.

‘And you are my guru,’ said Danish.

They met at a *chowk* near Liaqatabad in the morning at about 11 o’clock, greeted each other, and set off for the seaside before the sun got higher. They had covered about half the distance to the beach when suddenly something heavy struck the walls of the area they were in. They were terrified as a fire broke out caused by the rocket launcher.

The next day, the news item was repeated on all the channels: ‘Yesterday, seven more fell victim to targeted killing in Karachi, including two teenage boys who worked at a cycle workshop.’

‘Cruel people,’ said Mrs Fatima, a housewife living in the Defence area.

‘Yes, very cruel,’ agreed her sixteen-year-old son who was studying pre-medicine at a school.



## *Karachi, Then . . . and Now*

HILDA SAEED

### *1940's: Childhood Memories of Karachi*

The roads were washed each night, a necessity for what was considered the cleanest city in Asia! Of lots of camels and horses, and *ghora garis* (victorias) and little donkey carts. Of animals looked after well, with water troughs for them, and a large animal hospital. Of a Karachi that had grown fast from a little fishing village—it was named after an outstanding woman, Mai Kolachi. Of a cultural richness that I miss today. . . .

My parents came here from Vadodra, in Gujarat, India, when I was just 11 months old. I've grown up here, and seen this city through its many avatars. Karachi was lively with its mix of Hindus, Parsis, Christians, Jews, and Muslims. We loved all the festivities, especially Diwali and Holi. At Dussehra and Muharram, we'd follow the processions; all of that was so exciting to us kids. My parents had a cosmopolitan group of friends. With them we sometimes we went to a Parsi Navjote ceremony or a wedding, and celebrated Navroz with Parsi friends. And of course, enjoyed *mithai* and *sevian* at Eid. I still remember visits to the Swami Narayan Mandir and the temple by the sea. And Christmas! We went quite mad with excitement each year, decorating the tree, putting up Nativity plays, and carol singing. Sundays meant picnics after church—boating and fishing, or enjoying the greenery in Malir, or spending the day at beaches in Clifton, Manora, Hawkes Bay or Sandspit. Once we had a memorable trip

to Manghopir (just a drive away from central Karachi), an ancient settlement of the descendants of African and Arab tribes. They cared immensely for crocodiles, feasting them and garlanding them on special occasions. Their music and dancing was fascinating, wonderfully catchy with its African beat.

Most of all, we kids were safe. Our elders didn't have to keep worrying about where we were; we could happily spend hours playing with neighbours who lived nearby or friends across the road. Going to school was so different, travelling by *ghora gari* or tram.

### *The Struggle for Independence*

Vaguely, we were aware that huge meetings were taking place at Khaliqdina Hall, not far from where we lived (the historical spot where several political meetings were held; I believe Mr Jinnah also came there). Our neighbours and friends began to leave for India; my father was given the option at work: India or Pakistan? He chose Pakistan, believing in Mr Jinnah's words for non-Muslims in his speech to the Constituent Assembly, on 11 August, 1947.

Soon, the cityscape began changing. Schools were sometimes closed, there was difficulty in stepping out, or there was a curfew. Later I learnt how terrible the upheaval of the Partition of the Subcontinent into India and Pakistan had been. Even so, Karachi wasn't as bad as many other places. Reports came in of the tumult in Punjab. Gradually, a semblance of normality began to return. The city became more crowded; we learnt a new word, 'refugees'. Some refugees encamped just outside our house on the pavement; they stored all their belongings there, and lived in a tent. Similar sights came up all over the city.

*1950s, '60s and Early '70s*

Karachi's bright, throbbing life returned, despite the first military take-over in 1959. Jam sessions, picnics, music, matinee shows of local and foreign films, all became part of student life. For grownups, equally, there was nightlife; Karachi got its name: the City of Lights. *Mushairas*, *ghazal* programmes, live and recorded music—take your pick. And excellent movies: students crowded into every matinee show. Later on, a 'Princess Amina' came to the Palace Hotel, and she could really belly-dance!

Karachi's university, initially crowded into several buildings near the Civil Hospital, moved far away to what seemed way out of Karachi. Those of us who were students during that period became used to long treks on a small number of buses, but student life was wonderfully alive, filled with student union activities, debates, shows, and of course student politics.

*Late '70s and '80s*

Imperceptibly at first, and then with greater force, the country's social fabric altered, as military dictatorships followed one after the other, with a few unsuccessful efforts at democracy in between. While the country diminished, Karachi expanded, but it became more crowded, poorer, and deficient in civic facilities. Laws were imposed that drove home to us the fact that this was no longer a democracy. Violence began appearing on the streets, as we repeatedly saw the miscarriage of justice. The country's easygoing, tolerant way of life was forced into rigid patterns of belief and behaviour. The religious and cultural norms now emphasized chauvinistic tendencies, and mindboggling patterns of behaviour were imposed on women.



In 1981, a group of us women would have none of it. A routine meeting coincided with the imposition of a law which prescribed severe punishment for adulterers. A woman was to receive 100 lashes, her paramour was to be stoned to death—in public. We decided that enough was enough. Dictatorship or not, we came out in force on the roads, demanding justice for the couple—we eventually got it. That meeting, and the events that followed, gave birth in Karachi to Pakistan's feminist movement, the Women's Action Forum, which has now spread nationwide. Another facet: in the early '80s, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. Pakistan fought against the Soviets in aid of Afghanistan, supported by the US. In a short while, as Pakistan—through Karachi—served as the conduit for arms to Afghanistan, it also became the channel for smuggled goods.

As political turbulence raged, the country was awash with illicit arms, smuggled goods, and heroin. The results are seriously disturbed and violence-ridden cities, endemic terrorism, and a sizeable population of drug addicts; there is endless strife, with armed gangs roaming the streets. Simultaneously, the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan has continued; religious extremism and related violence have increased. The political turbulence continues, with increased corruption, poor governance, political upheavals, terrorism, misogyny, huge economic disparities, and consequently, growing poverty. Our children have grown in this atmosphere; my daughter was a toddler at the time of the Pakistan-Bangladesh war in 1971. At night, when fighter planes roared by overhead, she'd pass around cotton wool for our ears, to keep the noise out. Today, my little granddaughter spends weekends with me, and fears the sounds of gunshots.

A psychiatrist observed that the trauma we all experience is going to leave immense long term effects. Yet Karachiites have shown admirable resilience: they're determined to

reclaim their city. They must, for we have so much energy, so much talent, so much spirit and determination packed in here. Karachi has remained host to people from all over the country; it remains the industrial and commercial hub of Pakistan. Superb art, drama, music that's making waves, writing of international acclaim, voluntary work for the poor, a determined, talented and hard-working population—it's all there. If only it can be given a chance to survive, and fulfil its human potential. Thousands of us are working to reclaim our city, today, tomorrow . . . who knows when we will succeed? But we will!

*The Custom House:  
The Waiting Waiter*

MIAN NASIR MAHMUD

Karachi, on that Friday evening, was very quiet, very sad. It was a day of a wheel-jam strike called by politicians. The city was at a standstill as if it were frozen. My family decided to break the ice in the evening and we planned to walk out of our home to see if life had come back to normal after the day-long chaos and scare. It was the habit of our family to always get out of our home on such a day and move about in the breezy Karachi evening regardless of the circumstances.

That evening was special however. It was the darkest of the dark wheel-jam strikes. There was pin-drop silence all over. The fear of death was looming in the air. Every shop, store, cafe, grocery shop, and bakery was closed. Suddenly we saw a dim, almost extinguished, light inside our favourite cafe. The children started chanting cheerfully and fearlessly: 'Abba, Abba, let's go in!' Children do not know what fear is. So we went in. On a normal day, everyone at the cafe would have loved to greet my three children as we were among their frequent visitors. But not on that day. We saw Akbar, the sole waiter inside, who was rather surprised to see us. He was in a pensive, lethargic mood but had an excited look on his face as if he was waiting for someone.

'Pardon me, sir, but the cafe is closed and I cannot serve you anything. There is nothing in stock.'



‘Then why did you come to work on this wretched evening, Akbar?’ I asked.

‘The heart, sir, the heart,’ he said.

‘What has your heart got to do with your opening the place today?’

‘I am a poor man who has had a heart attack. Sir, I have to bear the expenses of blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease. I cannot leave my work even for a day, lest my family suffer from hunger.’ Before he could go on further we heard rapid Kalashnikov fire outside, mixed with highly abusive and provocative threats. The hoodlums were scaring everyone. Akbar rushed to the small door and closed it. He lit another small candle for us. The children were not scared. They were rather excited at the suspense and the drama. After waiting for a while, Akbar opened the door again to let in fresh air for us. The looters had gone away.

We decided to leave instantly when we heard the distant sound of a car engine humming slowly but clearly, coming in our direction. Worried again we returned to our table. The hum turned in to a thud and had now become louder and was heading straight towards the cafe. We were afraid, but surprisingly, Akbar was not. Now the vehicle had come to the door of the cafe and had stopped outside with its engine still running. Someone knocked at the cafe door. Akbar opened it and invited the visitor in. In came a tall familiar face with an envelope in his hand which was swiftly pressed into Akbar’s hands. I knew the man. He was a famous hockey Olympian and my college mate, known for his flamboyant life style afforded by the lucrative Customs job. People believe in hearsay and everybody who knew of him thought he had amassed piles of wealth during his Customs service.

‘What the hell are you doing here on this dreadful night, my friend?’ I exclaimed.

‘I cannot tell you,’ he said hurriedly. ‘Maybe Akbar will have an answer for you if he likes. Now I’m rushing home. It’s not safe to remain out. It’s better for you to leave too now, before it gets nastier and bitter,’ he advised me and fled that place.

My family and I would not leave the cafe before hearing the story from Akbar. Akbar said, ‘Since the day I have gotten sick, my sahib takes care of my treatment expenses, come rain or shine. He and I have spent decades together at this place and he could not bear the sight of me getting fired due to sickness. So he gives me money for my treatment and my children’s education. He has promised to take it back once my son starts earning but I know he will not. He has chosen the first Friday of each month for seeing me. I knew that he would keep his pledge even if he has to risk his life so I opened this place today.’

That Friday evening I left that cafe with a little moisture in my eyes. My wife and I were amazed at how the world looked at things. We were silently admiring Tanwir Dar, in a language quieter than the quiet of that evening. We had once again learnt the lesson of love. We had again come across a feeling lost to this material world and to this beloved city of Karachi which was turning fast into a city of killers of love. We had learnt it from a person who was perceived by many as someone loaded with illicit money. He had come a long way to talk to a poor man in the language of love, a poor man who could not probably return his favours. He had risked his own life to save another life but did not betray the trust of that poor man. My college mate’s act had once again ignited that small candle of love inside all of us.

I always thought Tanwir Dar did not have a care in the world, but one evening when I saw him missing among his group in

the cafe, I inquired from Akbar about his whereabouts. He informed me that Dar was in the hospital nearby.

‘It was nothing serious,’ Tanwir told me when I visited him right away. ‘Only my sugar level had gone a bit high and the doctors can’t operate on my gall bladder.’ And then he burst into loud laughter. There were few people and more utensils full of food in the small hospital room. This was enough for me to understand the time limit fixed by the doctors to bring his sugar down. One day, he died laughing at the age of 49 and left this world forever. He has left numerous memories of his good nature, his benevolence, and the pains that he took while caring for others. He might have become a rich man but his soul deep inside him was that of a cheerful, loving, and humane little child not spoilt by his riches.

For most working young men, the Customs House in Karachi is a very lucrative job. Some come to join Customs through the CSS examination and are appointed as Assistant Collectors. A large number of employees, however, join Customs at the lower grades, some of them on the basis of their sports abilities. Pakistan Customs have been great promoters of games, hockey in particular, because of the funds that they can generate for the promotion of games. Tanwir Dar, a Customs officer, at a lower level was a great hockey player and an Olympian.



## *Recollections*

SANA AKHTAR

With an insider, Karachi shares innumerable secrets. Like a long-married couple, they probably sit together through many sunsets and joke about all the things only they know of: silly, wry tributes to years and years of company and a bond that strengthens every time someone tries to break it. Conversely, to an outsider the city remains elusive, even if it welcomes them. But for those Karachiites who have moved somewhere else, even many years after their departure, Karachi stays with them; the city keeps seeping in from underneath tightly shut doors of memory.

When I was still very little my parents used to take me to the seashore of the city. I don't remember much about it, I was probably too young, but one thing I do remember is that their love for the sea was transmitted into me. I remember how enigmatic and fascinating each and every wave seemed to me back then and how strongly it affected my sense of aesthetics. And now, after quite a few years, one day I stopped at a seaside restaurant with friends. That part of the Arabian Sea was speaking to me at that very moment. I thought, maybe this was the place where my parents used to visit. Today, all I could think of at that very moment was how could anyone bear to live right next to something so powerful, so beautiful. How were people not driven into a frenzy by the sea as it crashed endlessly on the shore? Or maybe they were.

It was then I began to recollect how my grandfather used to tell me about our favourite city. He frequently used to

mention that in the early days after the Partition, Karachi was a beacon of hope and opportunity for migrants who came from everywhere. He often expressed that Karachi was once a city of dreams where everybody, irrespective of race, colour or creed, had the opportunity of prosperity and success and an upward social mobility through perseverance and hard work. No matter who you were or where you came from in pursuit of your dreams, you were received eagerly by this magnificent and truly metropolitan city. His earliest flashes of memory were of a beautiful city with sandy beaches, a city which never went to sleep and seemed to pulsate round the clock, unlike any other urban centre in the country. Its sea breeze-cooled evenings, scented by *raat ki rani*, were the stuff of poetry. Its famed nightlife was not only for the rich but was accessible to the middle class.

Yes, any bustling metropolis in the Third World won't be without its share of poverty. But Karachi somehow managed to take the poor into its embrace. Rarely did anyone sleep hungry. My grandfather talked about the *chai khanas* and eateries from the good old days. Cafes appeared ordinary yet inviting from the outside. You could instantly connect with those places. Tiny chairs, white topped tables, polite waiters, small teapots, and a display of antique crockery and cutlery. The service was prompt and waiters had a welcoming grin all the time. Among all those cafes, my grandfather especially talked about Lasbella. He specified that this particular cafe was the hub of all the writers and poets of that time. Then there was the coffee house at M.A. Jinnah road and PIDC's *paan* where my grandfather and his friends went on every night out. Social life was pretty fast, and I believe it still is.

In Karachi there is a blend of culture from all the provinces of Pakistan which makes it special. People in Karachi love to celebrate events, setting aside all the differences in cast, colour, and standards of living. There weren't many cars on the roads

back then, but one still caught an occasional glimpse of cars, roaring down Victoria Road, like pre-war MGs or muscle cars with the V-8 engines. Chevrolet was the king in those days and during the fifties and sixties, right up to the early seventies, the Chevy Belairs and then the Impalas were the most popular of all cars. The Dodge Darts came in during the early sixties and were fairly common, but the Chevy was the automobile of choice. Karachi is known informally as the City of Lights; fast forward to several decades later and Karachi has aged tremendously. It is no longer considered a starry-eyed child nurtured by ambition.

Nowadays, as I step out of my home, I can see three young men standing in the middle of the road with automatic weapons. They fire three shots in the air. There is a young man who struggles to catch his breath as he turns to look at the bus on fire. There is also a woman who is rushing to bring back her daughter from school. There are no rickshaws on the road so she starts to walk. There is a 55-year-old labourer who couldn't make his daily wage of Rs 400 because of the riots today. There is a patient who needs a weekly dialysis but he missed his slot today because of the strike in the city. There are Sindhis, Balochis, Punjabis, and Pakhtoons. All political parties own them, talk about them, and they are still on their agenda. But whenever their activists are killed, they hijack their homes, closing all roads. They leave us Karachiites stranded by seizing the petrol pumps, and shut down markets turning a deaf ear to our shouts of misery. In some ways, however, it is only befitting that Karachi has the sea on its side: the almost suicidal energy that rushes through the city every day and night—in every *dhaba* and every *siyaasi naara*, every over-filled bus and every *paan*-smattered pavement—seems to find a flawless mirror in the Arabian Sea. And yet, Karachiites keep walking, with bruised knees and scraped ankles, loving their city more and more every day.



## *Living in the Past*

AAMENAH KHURRAM

A single tear filled Abdullah's eye. He remembered how in the evening, everyone in the neighbourhood would bring down chairs and stools and gather in the middle of the road. Mothers would exchange recipes, fathers would discuss why we won or lost a cricket match. Grandmothers would be out with their knitting needles and, as the conversations grew spicier, their needles seemed to be at war with the yarn.

He looked to his left and his eye was caught on a corner which seemed familiar to him. Oh yes! It was the place Mr and Mrs Abbas used to sit with their lawn chairs to reserve the parking for their grandchildren who were always coming next Tuesday. Throughout his childhood, the spot had always remained bare, apart from the occasional times their grandchildren did come. Even then, Mr and Mrs Abbas used to come down with their lawn chairs and place them on either side of the car. Old habits die hard, as did they. Abdullah wandered a little further down the street and then turned to a building at his right. This building was where he learnt how to read and write. This was the building which he once called school. He smiled as images of his schooldays flooded his mind. Forgetting to do his homework countless times, often being late, and making the teacher smile with his occasional jokes. Laughter was a good companion those days.

He remembered the laughter of Abba Khan, the family servant. Every time there was a cricket match, the other guards and servants in the neighbourhood would one by one

enter Abba Khan's room and watch it along with him, even very late into night. He knew this because their cheering and hooting would go on all through the night. When the match ended, Abdullah could see through the window of the kitchen all of them depart slowly one by one.

Abdullah walked past the servant room and into his former house. Looking around, he began to picture how everything used to be. Pictures covered the wall, Ammi Jee was always in the kitchen, shouts of the children filled the air, and there was a wall-to-wall carpet. Ah, the carpet. Memories were soaked into every stitch. Outside and further down the street, Abdullah saw the familiar bunch of small shops, with names such as Bilal Motors or Saleem's Salon. More memories came drifting past.

Abdullah turned around and headed down the lonely street towards his own car. Distance made the heart grow fonder, and visiting the homeland of his youth was the only way to settle the beast inside him and his want for the air of Karachi. As he started the car, another tear rolled down his cheek.

'Baba, are you okay?' an innocent voice in the back seat inquired. Abdullah wiped his tears and turned his head. Looking over his shoulder, he nodded to the little person, forcing a smile on his face.

'Are you sure?' asked his wife in the passenger seat, reaching for his hand. Abdullah didn't have to force that smile anymore.

'Never better,' he said, putting both hands on the steering wheel. 'Living in the past not only ruins the present but also destroys the hope for a future.'

## *Breaking News*

IQRA ASLAM

It was around 8 p.m. when Grandpa Hamad started switching the channels on TV, but he suddenly came to a halt when he saw the red background with the word 'Breaking News' flashing on it. He fixed his eyes and ears on the TV, waiting impatiently for the news, but he got irritated as the news channel started to telecast the sponsors' ads first, rather than the news. He hastily switched to other news channels but to no avail. Half-heartedly, he returned to the previous channel with little hope. Finally, the newscaster appeared with an expressionless face and said, 'A member of XYZ political party was shot dead by an unnamed person in Karachi. The city is in a state of shock and terror. For more detail about the death of the political party member, we are contacting our news reporter. . . .'

Hamad didn't listen to the rest of the details and started shouting, 'Arshad! . . . Rubina! . . . Arshad! . . . Rubina! Call Abrar and tell him to get home quickly!'

His son Arshad assured him in a tense voice, 'Oh Father, you worry a lot. Karachi burns daily. And don't worry. Abrar is with his friends in a safe area. He has his car and will come home soon.'

Unable to say anything else, Hamad just shut off the TV and moved out of the TV lounge to say his *Isha* prayers and to pray for the safety of his only grandson, Abrar. After offering prayers, he phoned Abrar, but he didn't pick up the phone.



Hamad phoned him continuously but to no avail, so he began to pray to Allah for Abrar's safety, watching the door intently and the clock, in the hope that the doorbell would ring. He was annoyed to find that Rubina and Arshad were not even concerned about their only son, as Rubina was busy in preparing dinner and Arshad was busy in his office work. His heart ached and begged Allah: 'Please take care of Abrar. . . . Please make sure he returns home safely. . . . Allah, only You can give him protection . . . Please don't take him away from us!'

Around 10 o'clock, with little strength, he walked to the TV lounge and switch on the TV. 'Firing by anonymous people on car in Orangi. 3 killed and 2 injured,' said the first slide. '40 cars burned, 15 killed, 22 injured,' said a second slide. 'Emergency announced in Jinnah Hospital'; 'Governor announces 3 days of grief'; 'Governor has announced urgent investigation into this matter'; 'Firing in Malir by unknown persons. Five persons killed'; and so on.

Engrossed in this news, he called, 'Rubina! Rubina! Call Abrar and tell him to come home. The situation in Karachi is getting worse.' Then finally, the morning sun rose. Everyone was at breakfast except Abrar. Arshad and Rubina were in shock, when Hamad told them that Abrar had not come back yet and was also not answering his phone. Finally, Arshad was able to get through to one of Abrar's friends who told Arshad that he was with him the previous night, until Abrar left to drop another friend, Abid, at his house in Orangi.

The Orangi Police Station was crowded like a fish market. This was because of the previous day's situation in Karachi. 'His name is Abrar. He is 18 and is around five ten. He has a wheatish complexion. He has black eyes and black hair. This is his picture. He was driving a white Alto.'

The police officer, who was listening and writing every detail about Abrar, became silent and expressionless when he saw the photo of Abrar's smiling face. He then broke his silence by saying, 'Come with me'. With a heavy heart, Rubina and Arshad went with him. A feeling of frenzy ran down their spine when reading the sign on the room. The morgue! Their son couldn't be in there! He couldn't die so soon! Their minds were not accepting it and yet their feet were glued to the floor. They just stood still at the threshold.

'Please come in. It's just a possibility,' said the officer in an assuring tone. He then moved aside, allowing Rubina and Arshad to come forward. With cold feet and holding each other's hand to feel the other's presence, they took one step at a time to delay the dreaded moment as long as possible. But soon they were in the middle of the room. Before them was a body covered from head to toe with a white sheet, lying on a metal bed. Slowly, Arshad pulled back the cloth from the head of the dead body. It was Abrar. His face was white because of the cold storage. The hole on the forehead showed that he was shot and had died a painless death. Both of them froze for a second, as if nothing else was left in their life. Then Rubina started screaming and crying, 'This can't be the truth. Arshad! Arshad! Tell him to say something. He can't go away like this!' Then she faced Abrar's dead body, begging, 'Abrar! Abrar! Open your eyes. Your mom is here! You are everything to me! Please!'

It's been almost a year since Abrar's death, but no one knows who shot him. His file is also in the pile of other unsolved cases. For Hamad and his family, life stopped the day Abrar left this world. They still live in Karachi because it didn't matter to them if they left or stayed. And now they have become insensitive to the news and to what happens in Karachi.

## *Homesick*

M.T. SHAIKH

My grandfather has cancer. He lies all day on the bed in his room, looking out of the window at the garden. I look at him. He does not look at me and keeps staring out the window next to his bed. I gathered up courage and asked him in a small voice, 'Grandpa, why are you upset? Is it because of your cancer?'

Grandpa replied, 'No, Sarah *beta*, I miss Karachi. The last time I saw it was before moving here. I was born in Karachi on 5 July 1948. I fell in love with the city from the moment I was born. My family moved there after the Partition. They bought an apartment near Preedy Street. I still remember my home. Our apartment was on the first floor of a building called Jahangir Manzil. From what I recall, our building was near a large market, so every morning there were sounds of people buying and selling things. This market is known as the Empress Market. It was named after Queen Victoria of England. I remember that we were never short of groceries. Afterall a market was right next to our door! My childhood was the best time of my life. Well, it is for everybody. I can't forget those beautiful moments: playing cricket and football with friends in the park; enjoying the incessant rains during the summers; eating *pakor*as, which my Amma made during Ramadan and whenever it rained; most of all, I loved eating the succulent Pakistani mangoes especially the *chaunsa*. The mangoes here are nothing compared to the *chaunsa*.



‘Then my father died, leaving us high and dry. I was eight. I was devastated by his death. I remember that after my father’s death, I used to wander around in the streets aimlessly. That is how I got to know my area inside out: the Empress Market; Elphinstone Street, you name it. I even knew the potholes on the roads and the pavements. I had three brothers—Raheel, Kamal, Yaseen—of whom two, Raheel and Yaseen, were older than me. My eldest brother was twenty years old at that time. He had to leave his studies to make ends meet. That same year Raheel got involved in some political fiasco and was murdered. His enemies also threatened to kill Yaseen and me. Yaseen and I were the only ones left of our family. I was in an engineering college at that time. Yaseen’s boss advised him to migrate to Canada. That is when I got separated from my beloved city. Well, most of all, I missed playing cricket with my friends. Before every match we used to gather at some place and then go together to the playground. There were not as many cricket grounds here back then, you know. I loved the game and sorely missed it.

‘Yaseen easily adjusted to the environment in Canada. He also got a job at a prestigious firm here. However, I took a long time in finding a job and settling down. During this period, I got married, your father and your aunts and uncles were born. Then Yaseen died. Now that I’m on my deathbed, it pains me that I never got a chance to see Karachi again after I left it. I would love to visit Karachi for just one day and visit its beaches, restaurants, and memorable places.’

He ended his story as tears welled up in his eyes. He wiped them, smiled, and said, ‘Well, now you know my tragic story.’

Later, I went to Grandpa’s room again and still found him melancholy. I gave him a box which contained a lot of documents about Karachi that Yaseen Uncle had given to Daddy. His face lit up like a young child who just been given a candy.

## *The Lost City*

MICHELLE AZAM MAIRAJ

The grandfather came out of the room and was making his way to the patio, the walls of which were covered with vines and the aroma of lavender filled the air. He saw that his grandson who was sitting in the TV lounge, watching the usual news of bomb blasts, fights between tribal groups, target killing, and other mishaps going on in Karachi that fate had to offer. At this sight the grandfather took a deep sigh. The grandson heard his grandfather and came running to cheer him up.

The grandfather stroked his grandson's hair with love. With an expression that described that he was plunged into one of his nostalgic reveries, he said, 'Let me tell you the story of this city which used to be rich in culture, tradition, and ethos. It was a land of peace, strong in its sovereignty. It was a liberal city with people of different castes, creeds, and colour. Every evening people used to dress up in their best attire and use to make their way—some to Mosques, some to Churches, and Hindus and Sikhs and Zoroastrians to their temples. There were also Jews who use to go up to their synagogues with serene and composed looks on their faces. And it was not surprising to behold some people making their way to bars and pubs. This city was a place where people came for jobs and it used to be a domicile for these immigrants. This city used to help keep everyone's house stove lit. Many people in the past era had migrated to this city and lived happily

here and used to relish the facilities that the city had to offer until. . . .’

‘Grandfather, I believe it’s just a figment of your old imagination,’ the child snickered.

But the grandfather, with a gloomy expression and tears filling up his eyes, said in a low voice, ‘This was our very own city Karachi.’

The child was utterly shocked at this revelation because in his life he had known Karachi only as a city where bomb blasts, fights about creed and colour, and target killing had put to death many people and had also diminished hope and had given birth to pessimism. ‘But Grandfather, you were the one who told me that you kept my name such that it did not reflect whether I am a Sunni or a Shia. If it did, it would be a threat to my life. How can you say now that in the past even followers of different religions, not just sects, lived peacefully together in Karachi?’ cried the child.

The old man said, ‘I remember Karachi as a tranquil place, and now when I tread on the same streets where I spent my childhood playing, a feeling of homesickness overwhelms me. It is not that every citizen of Karachi is a terrorist or a extremist. Most of us are simple human beings whose wish is to return safe and sound after leaving their homes in the morning to work.’

‘Grandfather, I solemnly vow to you that I will endeavour to make Karachi just like it was in the past. I will involve my friends and will start a campaign to make Karachi a tranquil city, and to bring to life the place that exists in your nostalgic memories. Even if we can do little, but we will try our best!’



## *The Struggle*

NABEEHA CHAUDHARY

He thought he looked best in his black *shalwar kameez*—the *ghunda* look, he liked to call it. She adored him when he stepped out in a white one. He said he liked the idea of inspiring fear in others. She laughed and told him he was ridiculous. He took pride in his tall stature, his strongman built. She was proud of the softness embedded within the hardened chiseled lines of his face, and the eyes that refused to be cold no matter how hard he tried. If only everything else could have been as black and white as those *shalwar kameezes*. There was so much grey for him, for them, for the city. It was the murkiest of greys which everyone in the city encountered daily. Karachi—a city defined by a constant tug of war. She could never quite decide how she felt about it. He was like that too. He was just like Karachi, but she knew how she felt about him. She loved him, but that was probably because she had gotten a chance to get to know him. She thrived on human contact, human connections. He liked to keep everyone at a distance.

‘Stop associating with every idiot who you come across,’ he would say repeatedly. When she paid no heed to his endless unsolicited advice and refused to share his suspicions he began to set ultimatums. ‘You have to choose. You can’t be a part of my world if you accept them. This world is an evil place. People are evil. All they need is an opportunity to use you and exploit you. Stay away. Don’t give them a chance to hurt you.’

She tried every soft word to try and convince him that shunning everyone to hide from the few who might harm you was not the answer to life. He refused to believe; his convictions were strong, stubborn. 'Why can't you be happy being the good guy you are? Why are you bent upon selling your soul? You don't even have a half-hearted excuse or justification for wanting to go down the wrong path. Think of the thousands who live around you in poverty; starving, but still not resorting to this. You have everything that millions of people strive for day after day. Then why?'

'Because this world was not made for the survival of good people, so I'll pretend to be bad,' he said quietly and turned away from her. 'You might lose yourself in the performance,' she said throwing her hands up in the air as she got more and more frustrated. 'You *will* lose yourself in it.'

'I want to lose myself in it!' he exclaimed banging his fist on the dark wooden table. 'I want to be numb. It's not my fault that I'm forced to be a part of this disgusting world. God didn't ask me if I wanted to be here before He set me down.'

She shook her head in disbelief and wondered for the hundredth time what she could possibly do or say to change his mind. 'Listen to me,' she said taking his hand.

He gripped her shoulders and bent down to look directly into her eyes. He had a cold look in his eyes, one that had been creeping in more and more recently. 'Everybody is out to take advantage of you! You have to show them whose boss before they get a chance to damage you! But what would you know? You live in a world of fantasy, of books and stories. Don't interfere in things that you know nothing about.'

'I trust you more than anyone in the world. You're the only person in the world that I've learnt to love this way.' For once, his sturdy hands were shaking. He closed his eyes, and took

a deep breath. Then he pulled the trigger. A single shot rang out and she fell without a sound. He had shot her. With a single bullet, in a single second, just like that.



## *Hope*

NAJIA ALI RASTGAR

‘Apa, why aren’t we going to school today?’

I was a little surprised by the question. It had become a usual routine to get off from college and school due to Karachi’s unstable conditions. ‘Because it’s closed’, I replied simply.

‘Why is it closed so often?’ she inquired, ‘Is something wrong?’

How can one explain this to a little girl? I thought about the whole of Lyari’s grief, the internal civil war; Karachi was definitely not in its prime these days. No doubt it was a flourishing city, but it recently felt as if it was shadowed by a dark cloud. Dark cloud! That’s it! I could tell her a story!

‘How about I tell you a story?’ I asked. ‘It’s similar to the reason why our city is unsafe nowadays. The story is about me and a few friends, getting on with our ordinary lives, in a small place, like on a fertile rocky island and one day on our way home when we got lost. Lost like the people in Karachi are—confused and in conflict with each other. Anyway, one dark night we were all trying to find our way home. We were out just on a regular hike; an everyday routine. But somewhere we lost our way. Somewhere far off we heard gunshots, and we increased our pace, terrified. I was leading at a fast pace, still slightly heated at Hamid’s comments. We all wanted to get home alive! I stopped dead in my tracks. Oh God! There was a clearing with two men holding firearms. They were shooting randomly in the air! We ducked back into

the thicket, Asma and Sana leading, and changed our course, running as fast as we could to get away from the shots. Thud!

'Ahhhhh!' Sana let out a huge scream.

'What in the world?' I exclaimed, coming up front where all had stopped short.

A bird had fallen smack on the ground right in front of us! It looked up with its helpless eyes, shivering slightly. It had been shot. I looked at it and blinked, turning away as my eyes filled with tears. It was unbearable. Death for the little creature seemed unfair. There was a long moment of silence, broken finally by Amir. 'Let's move on, we don't have time to waste. It's getting more dangerous each second.'

'No! Not yet!' Asma bent down near the little bird and started digging.

'Seriously?' There was an outburst from Amir. 'We have already lost daylight, our food supply is low, the torches' batteries are almost finished and you want to stop everyone to bury this bird? We don't have time for this!' He angrily picked up his bag and moved ahead. The rest started trudging slowly after him. I bent down and helped Asma, and within minutes after a hurried burial and a quick prayer, we ran and caught up with the others. They were waiting at a distance, moving on slowly so we could catch up. All were a little disturbed, sorry for the loss, but wanting to ignore it and preferring to move on. I couldn't blame them. There's so much pain here. How much could one possibly take? Sometimes you just have to let things go and delude yourself with normality to carry on. I couldn't help but think of the family the bird would never return to. How that family had been ruined. But the hunters didn't care.

'What?' Asma asked in disbelief. 'Rain? It can't rain!' I tugged at her hand and she stumbled forward. We started

walking faster, changing our direction towards the shadowy mass, which we hoped was a series of hills. We tried to stay under the trees for temporary shelter. There was a dog or a wolf howling in a distance, slowly, almost as if mourning for the bird and pitying our state. We broke into a run. The raindrops were heavier and faster than ever and a slight rumbling of thunder could be heard. We could still make it. Running as fast as we could, shoving all aside to make our way, we tried not to stumble on the wet roots and pebbles. It felt as if we had run a marathon by the time we finally reached the rocky area. 'There must be a cave! There has to be one! At least an overhead rock!' Amir shouted. We were all bent on our knees catching our breath. The wind was howling deafeningly; the rain and storm were at its brink.

'There!' yelled Hamid. I switched my gaze in the sound's direction and listened hard. 'There's something there!' We all stared to make out what Hamid was trying to show. Suddenly amidst the thunder the lightning struck again, revealing a small opening about eight feet up in the rocks. The boys made a hand step and I signalled to go first and check the ledge. I climbed up on their hands and grabbed the torch Sana held out for me. An unbelievable sight beheld me. It was like a huge cave, the top was smooth and whole but the ground had cracks and was a little rocky. Nonetheless, it looked safe. I climbed in and gave a safe signal, and one by one the others joined me.

'Our lucky break! This is not bad!' Amir shouted. 'Let's rest while we can.' It was early in the morning when I awoke, and I could hear the birds chirping softly in the distance. As the first rays hit the rocky cliffs, the light shone in brightly, illuminating the cave's cracks and crevices. I lay in silence and watched the sky become brighter. In that moment of peacefulness, I gave a short sigh and smiled—there was always hope. We just need to find and utilize it. I got up and looked



around, calling the others get up in the cheeriest voice. They rose their sleepy heads and looked up.

'Life won't wait forever! Move it! It's now or never,' I announced as I jumped from the cosy shelter into the wet mud, and soon me and my friends trampled on.

'The end,' I said with a smile.

She looked up at me and then said, 'That was a really good story, Apa. Thank you, I get it now.' I have one question though! Does the ending mean we can go to school tomorrow?'

Better days are going to come, I thought. A storm was indeed passing now, but it will, like all others, give way to a new sunny day and a fresh start.

## *Definitions*

SANDHYA KARAMAT BARLAAS

A bunch of students came out of the university building and sat at its steps. They were discussing that day's lecture on history. It was on Karachi. 'History is always boring to study,' Ambreen, one of them, remarked nonchalantly. 'And more so if it is the history of the city one lives in. Consider us, aren't we exhausted by the history of Karachi?'

'History is boring,' Farhan intervened. 'No doubt, but Karachi can't be labelled as 'boring', can it?' He looked towards the others for approval.

'Yeah,' Shahid agreed. 'Karachi can be anything but not boring.'

'You all are talking about Karachi,' Rehana began in a slow manner. 'But nobody, including myself, knows what Karachi really is, or its definition. Why not define it first?'

Nothing could be heard for a few minutes, except the chirping of birds in the warm, bright sun of noon. 'Got it!' came the abrupt cry from Benazir, who had been silent from the very beginning, startled all, including the now abashed Farhan. 'I had been thinking for a very long time what Karachi is. I have now decided one thing: that the K in Karachi stands for kaleidoscope. Don't you agree that Karachi is virtually a kaleidoscope?'

'What childishness,' Sehar frowned at both Benazir and her suggestion. 'It's not childishness, Sehar,' Benazir defended

herself. 'This dictionary defines kaleidoscope as a tube that you look through to see brightly coloured patterns which change as you turn the end of the tube. Now you all listen to me carefully, and no interruptions please. Imagine Karachi as the tube. See the various modern and past people, and people of different religions, living in Karachi, the tube. The different types of people are the patterns. Turning the end of the tube is like the years passing. With these passing years, the different groups of people—the patterns—change, as do the people's thoughts. Thus, it would not be incorrect to say that the K in Karachi stands for kaleidoscope.' Benazir looked towards the others for their opinion. All of them clapped loudly in admiration.

As the applause subsided, Ambreen, forgetting the incident that had resulted in the group's silence some time ago, started talking keenly, 'And the A in Karachi indicates action or activity. You know how lively people are here, lively and busy. Since Karachiites believe that time is money, you see them constantly busy, doing one thing or another, with no time to waste. You always find its streets blocked with traffic and its people always full of activity, living a life with a hectic schedule. It's like one action or activity is entangled with the other and that entangled with still another like a complex net of entangled actions.'

After a moment's silence, Farhan added, 'The R is, maybe, for rebels because people in Karachi, the Karachiites, don't put up with oppression and such things; they rebel.'

Sameer, the youngest of the group, announced solemnly, 'Rebels are present in every part of the world, and not specifically in Karachi. So I would like to present my opinion as to what the R stands for. 'According to me, Farhan's suggestion for the R was only a little different from mine. Rebellion is one thing, riots another. And I must say that the incidents of violence or riots in Karachi have increased



immensely these days. Riots—the R—are central to the definition of Karachi.

‘What about the second A?’ Shahid asked, adjusting his spectacles. They all looked pensive, trying to figure out in their mind what the second A meant. While thinking, Benazir noticed a girl sitting at the far end of one of the building steps at which they were sitting. The girl was writing something. Benazir nudged Shahid who sat next to her, and pointing towards the girl whispered, ‘See, Shahana the bookworm. Why is she sitting near us today?’

‘God knows why,’ Shahid mumbled indifferently. ‘The second A is for abductions,’ he said happily, glad at the thought that he had found the answer.

‘No,’ this time Rehana contradicted. ‘You are wrong.’

‘Why?’ Shahid asked. ‘Karachi is one of the most dangerous cities of Pakistan in terms of target killings, kidnappings, terrorist activities, etc.’

‘But I have never heard that Karachi tops the list for its kidnapping rate,’ Rehana spoke squinting in the sun, as her eyes accidentally fell on Shahana who had stopped writing, perhaps to think something, but then immediately resumed, as if she had found the answer to whatever she was thinking.

‘Neither have I,’ said Aaliya ‘These arguments, these contradictions, these make me feel intensely that Karachi is extremely hard to understand. It is difficult to define Karachi, which brings me to the conclusion that the second A in Karachi stands for abstruse.

‘Right,’ Farhan said. ‘Now think about the C’.

‘The C is for callous, I think,’ said Sehar with a slight touch of melancholy. ‘Innumerable people were killed in the past here, innumerable are being killed at present, and even more

would certainly be killed in the future. And Karachiites continue to mourn their loved ones' deaths, and yet continue to go on. Karachi has seen, and still sees, so many deaths and so many tears, but does nothing to improve its condition. So can't we say that Karachi is unsympathetic, insensitive, and pitiless? I mean callous. Huh?' They all nodded in affirmative.

'I know what the H denotes,' said Shahid with great certainty. 'Haemoglobin is the red substance that carries oxygen in the blood. And our History professor has told us that Karachi has been the largest commercial and industrial centre of the country since . . . since . . . I don't remember since when. But that means it is a very significant city for Pakistan's survival. And, as you all know, oxygen is essential to all living things. And haemoglobin, the red substance, is what helps transport oxygen in the blood. Imagine Pakistan as blood, merchandise as oxygen and Karachi as haemoglobin. Isn't everything clear now? Karachi is the city that provides all the Pakistan with goods of all types. So H is for. . . .' Everyone in the group accompanied him in saying, 'Haemoglobin!'

'Now come quickly to the I,' Farhan urged.

'There is an ivy plant climbing our house,' Rehana said, watching the sun-lit sky. 'It needs to be cut very frequently as its growth rate is very, very high. It's an evergreen plant. It keeps growing, be it spring or autumn. I am comparing it with Karachi. Look, in Karachi, the death rate is high, but isn't the birth rate as well? Karachi is still prospering, like ivy, which has to be cut so frequently and which grows so speedily. In addition, as ivy is evergreen, so is Karachi. Karachi is not affected by seasons, which keep changing all year. In this way, Karachi is no different from ivy. Therefore, I say that the I stands for ivy.'

‘And with this, Ms Philosopher brings us to the end of this conversation,’ Aaliya said out of respect and praise, rather than derision.

As they were about to get up, after hugs of congratulations all around, they saw Shahana coming towards them. ‘Thank you all for your critical analysis on Karachi, for defining the city actually,’ she said. ‘I had been, with all my might, thinking about what story to write for the competition, but had a very vague idea of Karachi.’

‘Competition?’ they all asked in unison.

‘You don’t know about the short story writing competition?’ Shahana exclaimed with astonishment and ardour. ‘Actually you have to write a short story centred on Karachi. If your story is selected, they would print it in a book. I am sorry I overheard your conversation, since you all are strangers to me. But it was so interesting that I could not help stopping here to eavesdrop. Now, with the help of your critical analysis, I have completed a brilliant story. Bye and thank you again,’ with this she walked away gleefully.

As soon as she had gone, the group members looked at each other. Then quickly pens were brought out from bags and notebooks opened. Now the sound of quick scratching of pens on paper, in addition to the chirping of birds, could be heard outside the Karachi University building.



## *The Speaking Walls of Karachi*

SYED MUHAMMAD JAWWAD

The walls of Karachi are very bold; they express everything without any censor. From the slogans of political parties to the courses offered by coaching centres, they carry great information. One day, I was on my way to college like everyday, walking alongside street towards the bus stop, when I realized that the walls were speaking to me. So I listened. One wall was selling education for very cheap on behalf of some educational institute: Nation builders, 100 per cent results, quality education, etc. I interrupted and asked the wall about the competence and qualification of that coaching centre because I thought that an institute which did not know the ethics of advertising could not know how to produce nation builders. The walls did not have any answer but agreed with my viewpoint. I said to it, '*Chanda!* Education cannot be sold because it is priceless, it can only be spread and you do not need to advertise it.'

While waiting for the bus, I heard the walls behind the bus stop abusing some personalities. I listened closely and got to know that they were chattering about our political leaders. I was shocked! Where had these walls had learnt this kind of bad language! So I enquired from one of them, 'Hey! Who teaches you these words?'

It reacted angrily, 'Why should I tell you? Who are you?'

When I replied, the wall laughed. I stopped talking further with those walls because of their behaviour. I got on the bus and stood at the door. The bus moved but after a while it was stopped by

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a traffic sergeant because it was overloaded and lots of people were even sitting on the roof. While the bus conductor was negotiating with the officer, I smelled something very stinky. I noticed that the smell came out of a very dirty wall which was crying. I asked it, 'What is the problem?'

It said, 'I am constantly shouting that peeing is not allowed here but nobody cares.' I did not know what to say but I realized that this was because of lack of public toilets in the city.

The conductor had successfully negotiated with the sergeant for Rs 100. The bus started again, moving very fast, racing with another bus of the same route. I was depressed after listening to the different tragic stories of the walls. I know that walls will speak whatever it is that we want them to say. We can make them look beautiful or ugly; it's our choice. If every person takes the ownership of the city, every wall will smile because no person writes on the walls of his own house. Karachi is our city and we have to live in it like it is our own house.



## *Karachi, My Beloved!*

WAFATARIQ

'I faced many obstacles and had gone through many ups and downs in life, yet Karachi embraced me with its arms wide open. For a week I slept on the pavement of Elphinstone Street. I was out of money. I searched for work day and night. If I could have thanked my father for anything, then it would be for the education he gave me.

'I married a woman who I loved my whole my life and promised her to give all the happiness I could give. I worked day and night and provided her with a house at Burns Road. I used to walk with my wife wherever we wanted to go, without any insecurity. When Karachi University was established in 1950, I decided to continue my studies. My wife completed her second Masters degree and I was the first one to pass out with a Masters in commerce and economics from Karachi University. My wife is now a successful teacher and I retired as a senior vice president of PICIC.

'We brought up our kids with the intention to give them a life much better than we had lived and for this we faced many hardships. Today I am proud to write that we are both free from all our obligations concerning our children. We used to live near Ram Swami Tower, and then had to move to Nazimabad. Bara Maidan used to hold a circus every month, and I would take my children there, they would happily trot along and on the way back would buy '*malai wali baraf*', i.e. ice-cream. The present day Sea View was even more beautiful in those times; the water used to reach the Jahangir Kothari Parade Ground.'

When I finished reading the diary that I found in my grandmother's bookshelf, I decided to know more about their love story and about the beautiful city my grandfather had hinted about in his diary. When I inquired her about it, at first she blushed at the words 'love story' but as we consider each other best friends, she started telling me that they met at Dhoorajee while she was eating *rabri* with her friends. She then said that my grandfather was wearing a *kurta kameez* when she first met him, when she accidentally spilled *rabri* on him. She said laughing, 'Your Dada was walking so absentmindedly that he didn't see someone was walking towards him. I knocked my *rabri* all over his shirt!

'I never want to leave this city though, no matter what. The love of this city is eternal for me. Its lanes and trees remind me of my beautiful past, they call me back even if I leave for a day or two. You know, Wafa, the only difference between the people of Karachi today and in the older days is that people had time then. They were satisfied even if they had to travel by buses or trams. People used to care and would hold each others' hand in the time of need. Today, there is this race for being wealthy and there are jealousies. I am still hopeful that this will change. Karachi has given me so much; its salty air refreshes me whenever I am depressed. Speaking of which I am depressed now so you better take me and my old bones to the seaside.'

## *Give Me Back My Karachi*

MOHAMMAD SIDDICK FARUK

When I was a kid, my daily routine used to be to sit on the windowsill of my Garden East bungalow and wait for the caravan to arrive. It never failed me. So thoughtful and considerate was the driver that instead of riding the camels, which would have added extra weight for the poor animals to carry, he used to walk, leading the camels by a rope. Each camel, with a bell round its neck, carried, on its back, dried grass tucked securely on either side of its hump. The ringing of the bells, as they trudged forward, was music to my ears; the sight was a delight to behold—serene, disciplined, orderly. A true and beautiful picture of what life was like then. Alas! Such a sight is to be seen no more. These days, we have neither the discipline of the camels nor their order or even their unity. The law of the land was to walk straight and obey the master. Instead, we have made a total mess of our lives: chaos on the roads, honking which drives you crazy, traffic jams. What has happened to us? Why can't we learn from the camels?

In the good old pre-Partition days, there were water-troughs in every locality for the animals. We had such kind and considerate people who thought not only about the welfare of human beings but also about the welfare of animals. Most of these water-troughs were built by the Parsi community. Alas! All the water-troughs have vanished. The only water-trough now in existence is in Soldier Bazaar Market. There is a plaque on it which reads:

'Erected by THE SPCA KARACHI, the most valuable services rendered to the Society by MR FRAMROZE E. PUNTHAKEY



as Honorary Secretary for a period of 42 years (1879–1921), 1924’

The most disquieting aspect of this sordid issue is that the concerned government agency wants to take over this blessed piece of land, demolish it, and have a petrol pump built on it. This agency has shamelessly disconnected the water supply, with the result that there is now no drinking water for the animals since the last six months. We, as a people, are now totally devoid of shame, conscience, and the fear of God. Please, Mr Punthakey, come back. We need you more than ever before. Come back, Mr Punthakey! Karachi needs you. Come back Mr Punthakey, the animals are crying for you!

Just next to my house used to live Mr Justice C. M. Lobo. So overpowering and awesome was his personality that we used to pass by his sprawling residence in mute silence, making it a point not to run around his house or raise our voices in order not to disturb him. Even now, when I pass by his house, my car automatically slows down in due respect to him. The power of his personality still exists! It still exists in his name-plate, on the pillar of the compound wall where he used to live. Other respectable High Court Judges used to live in Garden East too. To name a few: Mr Justice Tufail Ali A. Rahman, Mr Justice Abdul Kadir Shaikh, Mr Justice Z. A. Channa, Mr Justice H. T. Raymond, and Mr Justice Rahim Baksh P. Munshi.

On the outbreak of the Second World War, my father gave me strict instructions not to step out of the house as the war was on and, if I did, the enemy would kill me. The next morning, I got up and looked through the locked gate for the enemy’s arrival. None came. I waited the whole day. Putting on a brave front, I told my father, “Dad, no enemy came. I killed them all: the Germans, the Japanese!” I still can’t forget the blank look on my Dad’s face. Instead of decorating me for gallantry, all I was rewarded with was a funny look. Gallantry is not recognised

during war: it is only after the war that the soldiers are decorated. I am still waiting for my decoration!

Karachi was known for its cleanliness and elegance. And, rightly so. We never saw anyone in unclean clothes. Immediately after Partition, one fine afternoon, I saw a man in dirty clothes outside my house. This was a strange sight for me. I ran inside my house and called my brothers and sisters to see this strange fellow. He had not washed his clothes!

In the good old days, we never talked about religion. All were equal! All were welcome! There was no animosity, no hatred, no envy towards each other. We were all children of God. There was peace amongst us and tranquillity in the atmosphere. The Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and Parsis were one community: each was concerned about the welfare of the other, each respected the other. Now, everything has changed. Our lives today are full of religion and religious activities; all the beautiful regard we had for the religion of others has gone. We hate and kill each other for no reason at all. Is this what religion teaches us?

Gone are the days when going to the movies was like going on a picnic. Those golden Bombay films are fresh in the minds of the cinema-goers of yesteryears but, alas, the cinema houses are no more! Rex, Plaza, Naz, Eros, Rio, and many more have all been demolished. During our college days, in the recess, my daily routine was to visit the 'Belles' of Karachi, residing in Thokhar Gali (the name says it all) and Japani Road: how did Japan come in the picture, I wonder. And Napier Road: the conqueror of Sindh must be stirring in his grave, to learn how his name has been debased so! I made many friends and learnt many new names, like Chemoo, Nishoo, and the unforgettable Gulabu. In our relationships, there was a discreet arm's length distance. All I can say is that the girls used to sing: '*Duur sey humse karo baat, agay baroo gey to na aoongi haath*'.

Karachi and its environment have deteriorated with the passage of time. The best period I remember was the 1940s. Gradually, it started becoming worse with each passing day. It shows no sign of improving. What a shame! In the end, I can only cry and plead: Give me back my Karachi! The Karachi I knew! The Karachi I loved!



## *A Plea for Karachi*

ROSHAN ARA BATUL

It does not matter how deep the sea is, as it cannot contain our sorrows. This came to his mind while he watched the sea, kneeling for a long time on his knees at the shore, trying to soothe his heart burning with sorrow. Darkness, like the black hair of a woman, enveloped the whole of Karachi. The moon played hide-and-seek with the wandering clouds in the sky. It is the same moon which pleases. It changes the negative moods of people into positive thoughts and cools down their temperaments. It is the moon that always plays with the waves of the sea and soothes the hearts of the people. But, unfortunately, now it was adding to his agony. He pulled at his hair in despair but his eyes would not shed a single tear. He thought himself to be all alone and helpless in the presence of so many people. His eyes and ears were unable to see or hear the laughter of the people around him. He was only thinking of the innocent face that appeared in the window of his mind. The image asked, 'Why did I lose my life?'

Coming to Karachi was Aslam's dream. Before that, Aslam and Zeeshan were living a life of tranquillity. But Aslam was not happy with his poor status. He was responsible for getting his older sister married off. One day, while he was sitting with his mother, he said, 'Why shouldn't I go to Karachi to earn a livelihood, like everyone else? They go and come back after earning a handsome amount.'

Hearing these words, his mother cried, 'No, my child! How can you go to Karachi? Innocent people are killed by criminals there

nearly every day. Just forget about it; we are happy and content with what we have. Our village is a paradise for us. So kindly drop your idea of going to Karachi where people are killed every other day.' She spoke in a trembling and weak voice with tears in her eyes.

But Aslam was no longer a child afraid of his mother's frightening words. He said, 'Mother, everybody is travelling to and fro from Karachi.' Looking at his mother's sad face, he hugged her tightly and consoled her. Zeeshan had also asked him to drop the idea of going to Karachi, and told him to just continue doing what he was doing with dignity and respect. There was nothing more that they wanted from him! But, Aslam and Zeeshan did leave their village and reached the City of Lights, as Karachi is called. They worked in a factory for a year. Aslam's sister finally got married; then, his mother dreamt of getting Aslam married off. But, Aslam was still trying to earn a little more in order to arrange a better house for his mother. He did not want to go back. He ended up losing his life one evening, on his way home, due to a terrorist bomb blast.

It was his last day in Karachi. Zeeshan looked at Karachi's lights and the sea. With all the noise around him, he prayed to God, 'May God bless the people of Karachi with enlightened minds and open hearts as bright as the lights of Karachi and as vast as the sea around it, so that they can accommodate and accept others wholeheartedly and not steal the lives of those who live here to support their families and are the breadwinners for their families. May the latter be able to return the gift of sheltering the homeless.'

## *A Stranger's Property*

YASIR MANGI

Who doesn't know about the heavy traffic congestion as well as the beauty of the famous road known as Shahrah-e-Faisal in Karachi? On either side of the road, there are tall buildings and skyscrapers almost touching the sky. The glass windows of these buildings give the impression of the mirror embroidery on the neckline of your beloved's dress. Here, young women strolling on the footpaths wear beautiful but tightly-fitted dresses. They have smiles on their faces and are totally unaware of the 'x-ray' eyes of those who admire them.

On that day, the beauty of this road was its the peak: fast-moving cars; the sun's rays peeping into the glass windows of the tall buildings; people waiting at the bus stops on their way to work, dressed as smartly as school students on their examination day. As I was walking towards the bus stop near the FTC building on Shahrah-e-Faisal, I saw two men standing near the bus stop. They looked like respectable fellows by their appearance and seemed to be waiting for somebody. As I reached them, one of them greeted me and tried to shake hands with me, but I thought they were asking for alms and so ignored them by pushing them away. But then one of them got hold of my arm and immediately ordered me, 'Shake your right hand with me!'

I shook their hands and they inquired about my health. As soon as they found everything clear around them, they took out a pistol and, pointing it at my waist, ordered me to hand my cell phone over to them, threatening that they would take my life! I looked at the pistol and started shaking with fear;



looking around me for help, it seemed as if the people around me had become blind and deaf. The snatchers held the pistol so confidently while everyone else rushed by on their way to their offices. A few moments earlier, the road had looked beautiful—like paradise—but it had now turned into a frightening place, full of agony and despair. It had transformed into a desert and a war zone for me, from which everyone wants to escape to a safe place.

The beautiful rays of the sun touching the glass windows of the huge buildings looked like fierce flames of fire to me, and I thought of screaming and running away. But, at the same moment, one of the snatchers kicked me, hit me hard in my face, and said, 'If you want to live, hurry up! Give me your cell phone!' It seemed as if nobody was even trying to listen to my pleas while the snatchers, very confidently, robbed me. I thought I would literally wet my pants. No one responded and no one paid any heed to me.

I was numb and started looking at the buses with empty eyes. Suddenly, a man moved out of the mob and, placing his hand on my shoulder, said, 'Do not cry for such a simple thing. You seem to be an educated person. Why are you trying to act like an uncivilized person? Are you new in this city? Karachi is a city where your cell phone belongs to others. It is the property of others, not your's.'

I was wordless, as though I agreed with him!

## *When I am Sixty-Four*

MUMTAZ MAHAR

Jack Braganza had been serving in a private firm for about 30 years, when he suddenly received a termination letter. For a moment, everything went dark in front of his eyes because the letter mentioned that he had been making mistakes while maintaining the accounts. His forgetfulness and memory lapses could cause serious damage to the company, so he was to be relieved of his duties immediately. He had joined the firm as an assistant accountant, and was soon promoted to the position of a deputy manager. At the time of his termination, he was only 55 years old. His plans had been to retire at the age of 60 years and go and live in America where his son was already settled.

A new situation always creates new problems. His life's routine was disturbed. His wife, Christina Braganza, had been a teacher in a convent school for twenty years and was its vice-principal now. She was ten years younger than him but looked even younger—given her good health and good looks. Their daughter Maria, a college student, also taught students at home in the evenings, to help make ends meet.

After Jack Braganza's retirement, their expenses were met by their son who lived in America. He sent about six hundred dollars every third month, which was helpful in running their home. Thus, the Braganza family did not have any financial difficulties even in that situation. The only thing Braganza suffered every morning was the pain of loneliness when his wife left for work at 8.30 in the morning, and his daughter also left for college, and he was at home all alone. He only had two close friends, Tony

Marlow and James Stephen, who he met occasionally. One of his childhood friends, Pinto De Souza, had died a long time ago. There was a time when these friends used to enjoy their Sunday nights together. They used to spend some time on the dimly lit lawns of the Marina Bar where they enjoyed drinking beer, whisky, or gin, depending on the occasion. On important eves, such as Christmas or Easter, they met at the Excelsior Hotel to enjoy the dances. This was just before 1970, when Karachi was at the height of its glory. Every hotel, bar, coffee house, and café restaurant in the Saddar area was full of life. At the time, places of culture, such as the libraries, thrived and had not yet been turned into beauty parlours or jewellery shops.

Mansfield Street and its lanes were home to the Christian community from Goa. They had migrated to Karachi at the end of the 19th century, and had contributed a lot to the beauty of this multicultural city. Jack Braganza's family also originally belonged to Goa. But, they had resided in Karachi for years now, in a flat in one of the old buildings on Mansfield Street. The only change that had occurred was that middle-aged Goan women wore skirts and blouses, just like the Parsi women, whereas the younger Goan ladies wore *shalwar kameez* to keep themselves safe from the criticism of the conservative-minded immigrants who had come to Karachi—after Partition in 1947 and after the civil war with East Pakistan in 1971—and who lived in the shanty suburbs of Saddar which was the city centre.

Many of the clubs, cinemas, restaurants, and cultural centres of cosmopolitan Karachi eventually closed down by the end of the '70s. Parks and gardens had become a hub for addicts. In such a situation, people like Jack Braganza, who were used to parties in cafés or at the Marina Bar in the evenings, could not find a place to pass their time. While alone in his flat, Jack Braganza kept thinking and worrying all by himself. Sometimes, if he went onto the balcony of his flat, the sight of the worn-out buses, the smoke from the minibuses, the vendors, and the noise of



the encroachers made him hastily retreat to his room. He spent his spare time listening to Beatles' songs from the '60s, or other Western music, or reading mystery novels by Agatha Christie.

Everybody loves the days of their youth. The decade of the '60s was very important for people like Jack Braganza because they had lived their lives to the fullest in those years. It was the time of the Beatles' tight trousers, pointed shoes, Gianfranco Gorla styles, long hair hanging down to the shoulders, psychedelic shirts, and bush shirts. It was the time of watching Sunday morning shows in the best cinemas and of long hours spent sitting and chatting with friends in the evenings, routinely at one of the Iranian restaurants. Riding in trams and double-decker buses on wide streets always reminded everyone that Karachi was a beautiful city, in no way less beautiful than Bombay at that time. Gradually, Karachi transformed into a mini-Pakistan as people from the northern areas and the interior parts of the country starting coming to, and settling in, Karachi and forming shanty areas all around. Within a span of ten years, one of the neatest and cleanest cosmopolitan cities of Asia turned into one of its biggest slums.

Jack Braganza was losing his memory gradually. He started calling his wife by different names and, with time, kept forgetting his daughter's name too. He even forgot things placed in front of him. He asked his wife one day, 'Who are you, and who do you want to see?' It was not possible to leave him alone at home, and certainly not outside the home. His family consulted a doctor, and then took him to a famous psychiatrist who asked him a few questions to which he gave incomplete or wrong answers. Jack Braganza was diagnosed with early stage Alzheimer's with the chance that, with a happy pleasant environment, it could be kept in check. The doctor advised an assisted walk in the fresh air in the morning and evening; listening to more of the music that he took pleasure in; brisk daily exercise. He was advised to meet his old and close friends to keep his memories alive and

intact. He was also prescribed a few medicines, which were to be continued for a longer period.

It was compulsory for his wife to leave for school, and for his daughter to attend her college, in the morning. Coming home in the afternoon, and after quickly eating their hurriedly-made lunch, both of them took good care of Jack. They took him to the seaside occasionally in a taxi, or on a 'victoria' to Frere Hall Garden, which was the only place in the main city where, due to its historical importance, there was a presence of guards and a police station and so was quite safe for the families who visited it for pleasure. Sunday, being a holiday, was as busy for Jack's family as for any other family from Goa. Both mother and daughter would get ready and go to church. On their way back, they usually visited the sick to keep their social ties strong. The rest of the day was spent doing household chores. It was seldom for any of Jack's friends, or for a neighbour, to visit him on a Sunday evening. Jack usually spoke very little as he forgot things while talking and would get stuck and confused at times.

Despite all their efforts, his memory worsened. Now, he was unable to recognize his wife and daughter, and was almost like a statue. They treated him and cared for him just as if he was a small child. It was his wife's duty to get clean and wash him. Jack used to call his wife 'my dear' but now Christina longed to hear such words from her husband.

His 60th birthday was coming up. But, ever since Jack fell ill, birthdays for the Braganza family were quiet affairs. On this special occasion, inviting members of the other families or friends posed a problem for them. They decided to celebrate Jack's birthday by just cutting a cake and decided not to send any invitations, as it was difficult to tell if he would even understand that it was his birthday. This made his wife and daughter very sad.

A day before Jack's birthday, at 4 p.m. in the evening, everybody was taking a nap. Jack was lying back in his armchair with his eyes shut as if he was lost in his thoughts. Suddenly, the doorbell rang. Maria found a well-dressed lady standing at the door.

'No, I am sure that I have come to the right place. Doesn't Mr Braganza live here?' she said in an American accent. 'Is he alive?' she added hastily.

'Yes, he is my Dad. Come inside, come inside.'

She was made to sit in the sitting room and everyone introduced themselves. The visitor was Gul Rati Kaikaus. She and her husband, Jamshed Kaikaus, were settled in California for the last thirty years where they owned a family business. She had studied with Jack at St. Patrick's High School and DJ Science College. They had been friends and visited each other very often then, and were together until both of them got married. Gul Rati belonged to the Parsi community. But, though they were quite liberal, they preferred to marry within their own communities. As soon as Rati got married, she left for America. On returning to Karachi after three decades, she thought of meeting her college and schoolmates. She remembered where Jack lived, so she did not find it difficult to go over, although it was quite disappointing for her to see the traffic congestion, noise, and filth in his neighbourhood. She did not want to tell Christine and Maria that Jack and she had actually liked each other but knew the limitations in their relationship and had never crossed them.

She had tears in her eyes when she was told that Jack Braganza had lost his memory and was unable to recognize anyone. She went in alone to see him in his room. On hearing the knock at the door, Jack opened his eyes and straightened his back in his armchair. She sat beside him, holding his hands tightly and looking into his eyes, recalling all the moments they had passed



together. Then, she slowly started to whisper the words of a song he loved to sing to her:

‘When I get older losing my hair,  
Many years from now,  
Will you still be sending me Valentines?  
Birthday greetings, bottle of wine?  
If I had been out till quarter to three  
Would you lock the door?  
Will you still need me?  
Will you still feed me?  
When I am sixty-four.’

When Gul Rati Kaikaus repeated the last lines of the song, ‘When I am sixty-four’, Jack’s fingers tightened and gripped her hand tightly, and she noticed that his face was turning red with emotion. He started moving his lips, repeating the words, ‘When I am sixty-four’. Listening to his emotion-filled voice, Jack’s wife Christine, and daughter Maria, entered the room, watching him in great surprise. Jack continued singing the song, as did the guest, even more emotionally as Christine and Maria joined in. These were the most joyful moments for all of them.

## *Quiet Sea*

SADIA AZIZ AFRIDI

My eldest son Amir drove a rickshaw and had a regular passenger. This passenger was an important writer. Amir often brought him to our house. Farooq was a good person, and he was the only supporter of his whole family. His brothers and sisters were still small children, and they depended upon him. In him, I could feel the whole story of helplessness and poverty breathing in layers. His eyes used to see very bright dreams.

I asked him one day, 'When did you make friends with Karachi?'

He laughed slowly and said, 'When my friendship with my childhood ceased.'

I was startled by his answer. I asked, 'Why did your friendship with your childhood cease?' He put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'When life began to speak bitter truths, and my belly began to ask for bread, then my friendship with childhood ceased.'

'You are a very good writer,' I said in admiration.

'Thinking the truth is not as hard as uttering and writing it. Therefore, Uncle, I can never become a writer. I cannot become a writer because my pen is insistent upon writing lies. It shows an evil ego.'

Farooq came over daily, and I learnt something or the other from his words. Then he told us that his sister's wedding had been fixed.

'We have arranged for one lac rupees for my sister's wedding, but we need two lac rupees. Father is marrying her into an upper

class family,' he said worriedly, and Amir and I were worried about how to help him.

During those days of crisis, there was a bomb blast in the old market. Amir went out of the house in a terrified state. Farooq had taken his goods to one of his old clients in the market. We remained disturbed throughout the night. A list of the people killed had been attached to a board at the hospital. Amir put his hand on the shoulder of Farooq's father and said, 'Uncle, have courage.' His father collapsed; I, myself, leaned against a wall and tried to absorb this bitter truth. A government representative came and told us that the families of the dead would be given three lac rupees each. I thought, in great anguish, that Farooq's desire had become reality through his death; in fact, he had given much more to his family.

Suddenly, Amir got a phone call. I could not comprehend the excitement or expressions on his face. 'Farooq is in the same hospital!'

He ran, with us elderly ones running behind him. Farooq was wounded. It took him two or three months to recover. But, there was anguish on the face of his father: 'How will my daughter's wedding be possible? Jameel sahib! Now how will my daughter get married?'

His father wept bitterly. I looked at Farooq in a state of shock. I didn't know whether he had heard his father or not, but the tide in his eyes was rising.

Amir was enquiring after his health, but I could only hear the echo of his father's words: 'How will my daughter's wedding be possible? Jameel sahib! Now how will my daughter get married?'

Karachi may also perhaps absorb this sorrow like many of its other sorrows, but my heart still trembles at the helplessness hidden in those words.



## *Murad Ali*

AYESHA SHOUKAT

He surveyed the party with displeasure. Everyone was trying to outdo each other in their show of wealth. Murad Ali, oblivious to all of it, was completely absorbed in his own thoughts. Sweets were being distributed amidst words of congratulations. Two bags of the *bid* were handed over to Murad Ali as well. The *bid* was wrapped in finery in a bag, the likes of which Murad Ali had never seen before. From the house to the bag of sweets, everything was opulent. The two bags of the *bid* further added to his load. Murad Ali had four children. He was a photographer. Malik Rafique, a wealthy *seth*, had hired him to photograph his son's wedding.

Often, when he returned home late at night after covering some event or the other, he found his children awake, waiting for him. They would look into his bag and ask, 'What has our father brought for us today?' Murad Ali often used to buy four bags of *bid* from the bazaar and put them in his bag—so that the children, waiting for their father, would not be disappointed.

But, the situation was different today. It was a special bag. He would not be able to buy such bags from the bazaar. He could not bring himself to ask for two more bags. He decided, instead, that he would pick up two of the empty bags, discarded on the floor, and would divide the *bid* into four bags. At last, the time for sending the bride off to her husband's home approached. When the bride left, the hall emptied out. Murad Ali took some photographs of the departing bride and then ran into the hall to take his bags.

As he bent down to take two empty bags from under the sofa, his hand touched a heavy and expensive gold ring encrusted with gems. No doubt, its value would have enabled Murad Ali to acquire a small house for himself and his family but his conscience, wrapped in self-restraint and honesty, did not allow him to do so. He put the ring in his pocket, and reached the house of the bridegroom to photograph the wedding party. He told the bridegroom's father about the ring and handed it over to the *seth*. The ring passed around until arrived in the hands of the bride who said, 'This ring belongs to my father!'

Murad Ali felt great joy and said, 'Thank God for liberating me of a heavy burden.' The next day, while Murad Ali was photographing the *valima* ceremony, Malik Rafique introduced him to the bride's father. Murad Ali could see that he was even wealthier than Malik Rafique.

Staring at Murad Ali, the bride's father said, 'Oh, so he is the one! Rafique Sahib, people like him perform such acts only to get a reward! He would never have returned it if someone had not seen him taking the ring from the floor.' Addressing Murad, he continued, 'It is by virtue of Rafique sahib's kindness that you are standing here now. The area you belong to offends our car if it passes from there. Take this!' The father of the bride held out five thousand rupees to Murad Ali, 'This, after all, is why you returned the ring.'

Murad Ali's eyes filled with tears. The hollow and shallow words of the bride's father broke Murad Ali on the inside. He felt as if someone had placed a mountain on his head. In response to the harsh words, he could only say, 'Sir, you have got your ring back and this is the greatest reward for me, that the ring has been returned to its owner. The only pitiable thing is that you have hurt my feelings by doubting my honesty. Please keep your money. May God give you even more!'

With the passage of time, Murad Ali got over this sadness. One night, Murad Ali saw a car crash into a tree. The young driver

was covered in blood and was unconscious. Murad Ali stopped his motorcycle at once and called an ambulance. The young man was taken to the hospital in no time at all. The hospital required a family member to be present prior to any kind of treatment. The young man would have died had time been wasted searching for a family member. Murad Ali said, 'I am one of his family members. Please begin the treatment. I take responsibility for the expenses and for all kinds of risks.'

Murad Ali's blood group was the same as the young man's. He lay down on a stretcher at once and two bottles of blood were taken from his body. By the grace of God, the young man's life was now out of danger. The family of the young man had been informed and, a few moments later, his father arrived at the hospital. He enquired, from the doctor, about his son's benefactor. The doctor pointed towards Murad Ali who was sitting on a bench praying for the health of the boy. As soon as he saw Murad Ali, his eyes welled up with tears—because he was the father of *seth* Rafique's daughter-in-law.

Some days later, Murad Ali sat in his shop, looking out at the street in front of him. A Prado stopped just in front of his shop. Murad Ali saw, with trepidation, the father of *seth* Rafique's daughter-in-law entering his shop. Murad Ali received him warmly and offered him a seat. With shame in his eyes, the *seth* sat on the chair and said to Murad, with great difficulty, 'Murad Ali, you are a sincere person. God has made you a comfort for humanity. I feel great shame for having doubted your honesty. I was intoxicated by my wealth and was devoid of the passion of human kindness. Now I have realised that human kindness is above everything. Your character has changed my outlook. The young man whose life was saved by virtue of your kindness is my son. Since that day, a strange restlessness of mind has taken over me. I have broken your heart. I am indebted to you. Murad Ali, please forgive me. You are my benefactor.'



## *Rotten Bitter Gourds*

SHOAIB KHAZER

The final hours of 1998, in their last gasps, gathered within them the bitter memories of the whole year. Many new lamps were anxious to be lit with the vanishing of that evening. Amidst the torrential rain and cold of the evening, Abdullah sat on his chair staring at the fireplace. The coffee placed on the table next to him was getting cold but Abdullah, indifferent to it, found himself occupied with a bitter memory of the past. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

On 31 December 1989, when Abdullah came back from school, he was exhausted.

‘My darling has come; my soul has come. Wash your hands quickly. I have prepared a meal for you.’ Abdullah’s mother spoke these words with a broad smile on her face.

‘Mummy, I don’t feel like having a meal.’

‘My dear son, you did not have breakfast in the morning.’

‘Mummy, I shall eat after a while.’

‘My son, please fetch some vegetables from the shop so that I may prepare supper.’

Abdullah did not want to go. Heavy rain and thundering clouds had further worsened the weather. The intense cold made Abdullah reluctant to go out. But, despite his tiredness, he could not resist his mother’s orders. Abdullah went out of his house. As soon as he had walked a few steps, he caught sight of

a small six-year-old child without shoes who wore a shirt and a *shalwar*—inadequate to shield him from the intensity of the cold. He had an empty sack on his shoulder, which had also got wet along with his clothes.

Abdullah followed the child. The child stopped near a vegetable cart and asked the vendor, '*Tata (Chacha), tarab (kharab) tarailay (karailay) hain?*' (Uncle, do you have rotten bitter gourds?) The anguish hidden in his voice, the longing inhabited in his heart, and the expectation with which he asked this question were enough to make someone cry. Abdullah's heart was broken. The vendor took out some rotten bitter gourds and put them before the child, who began to put them into his sack with great joy as if he had discovered the Koh-e-Noor or had become the prime minister of the country. His immense joy was evident from his face. Intoxicated by this joy, he was just about to cross the road when a fast-moving Prado belonging to the son of a wealthy person ran him over.

Some people shouted, 'Note the license number of the car!' But, the Prado was already out of sight. There was nothing there except the marks of the tires of the car, impressed on the body of the child, and his blood scattered on the road.

Abdullah stared into the fireplace. Tears streamed down cheeks. The words '*tarab tarailay*' revolved in his thoughts. He wanted to cry aloud but he knew that his wailing would not change the fate of such children—whose fate is only bitter '*tarab tarailay*'.

## *Meet Her and Know You Beheld Beauty*

RIFFAT TOOR

Her face had turned pale, and her eyes drawn in, owing to the pain but her lips were still offering their wealth of a smile. 'I have a great pain in my side. Everything seems hazy.'

The nurse, Shahla, was crying bitterly. Dr Jatoi reprimanded her saying, 'A nurse should not be so emotional about her patients. This is against professionalism.'

'But sir! She has reminded me of the Holy Mother whose son, in the prime days of his youth, lay senseless and soulless in her lap.'

Dr Jatoi further unnerved the already anxious nurse by saying, 'Nonsense! Please don't let your imagination run away with you and go and see if the specialists have gathered in the conference room. This case has become a challenge for us. This woman's illness has not been diagnosed yet. Above all, there is an unending bombardment of phone calls for her. She seems to be a VIP. Pull yourself together. No more sentimentality!'

All the senior doctors sat helplessly, unable to reach a conclusion. Reports of all the tests from the various laboratories lay in front of them. All the doctors looked stressed. The reports were circulated amongst them. The more they concentrated on them, the more confused they became. Medical Superintendent Dr Jatoi raised his head, heaved a deep sigh, and cast a glance at the team of doctors sitting in a circle. 'Has someone reached a conclusion?'



Dr Sumera Chaudhry responded, 'It is a strange puzzle. Sir, it seems as if her whole system is affected.'

Dr Naqvi said, 'The cause for alarm is that it seems that all the parts of her body are reacting in opposite ways. If we prescribe treatment for one part, another part reacts negatively. No one knows what kind of mysterious disease she is suffering from.'

'Almost 28 days have passed, but there is no sign of improvement. The more treatment we give, the more her condition worsens!' It seemed as though Dr Memon would start weeping as he said those words.

But Dr Khan's face reddened. 'The whole blame lies with us. It is we who are unable to unravel the complexity. Either our capabilities have failed or our motives are lacking in sincerity, and so the whole situation is getting out of our control. I don't understand why this is a mystery in this age of science,' he said looking angrily at Dr Naqvi.

Dr Naqvi, while fidgeting restlessly, said, 'Where there is dishonesty in motive, magic is used to wreck havoc.'

Dr Jatoi, seeing the situation spinning out of control, reacted, 'Look! Don't fight among yourselves. If you go on in this way, I shall have to think of changing my team. We cannot play with her life.'

Dr Memon at once spread his hands, 'Look, brother! I have started having feelings of affection for her. I think you all must have such feelings for her too.'

All the doctors simultaneously said, 'Sure! Sure! We cannot think of abandoning her. We shall do whatever is needed for her.'

A journalist, standing at the door, overheard all this and took notes of the story. Suddenly, the door was opened and he almost bumped into Dr Jatoi. All the doctors were dumbstruck. There was a crowd of journalists, cameramen, workers of TV channels,

and citizens speaking various languages. There were bouquets of flowers, garlands, rosaries, prayers, vows, etc.

Dr Jatoi shouted, 'How did you get here? Where is the staff of the hospital? Please leave. Leave! This is a hospital, not a television studio! Staff! Nurse! What is all this?' Some members of staff were standing there, with their feelings reflected on their faces. A nurse mustered up her courage and said, 'Sir, news about the patient has spread throughout the city through the other patients.'

'What do you mean?'

'Sir, every person is impressed and inspired by the courage of this woman. She is so severely ill. All of her body is affected. No part of her body is cooperating with the other parts of her body. We all find ourselves unable to think of anything else except what will become of her. But, she herself is so courageous. She neither cries nor complains. Whenever we enquire after her health, she says with smile on her lips, "I am alright. Thank you!" But, the truth is that she is not alright. She is in a miserable condition. Oh God, please save her and heal her!'

One doctor said, 'Sir, this is true. You know that she has exhibited such patience during each of the operations we have done on her. Even we had lost hope in the previous operation, but. . . .'

'Yes, I also agree with all of you. The fact that she has survived till now is nothing less than a miracle. She has even become an unprecedented role model of courage and endurance for us.'

Suddenly, a famous anchorperson made his way through the crowd and reached the doctors, 'What is this news creating a tumult throughout the city? What wonder is this woman that you all find yourselves her devotees?'

‘Meet her and tell us if you have seen someone more beautiful,’ Dr Raeesani said with a smile on his face. No sooner did the anchorperson see the patient than he was startled. The tired woman lying on the bed fixed her inebriated eyes upon him. Despite the pain, she had an extremely affectionate smile on her face.

‘Madam, may I know your name?’

The sound of a melodious voice blessed the listeners’ ears: ‘Mai Kolachi!’





## *The Grace of Jojo*

SANIA KOKAB

‘Jojo, did you take eggs out of the basket? Now, what are you looking at while lying on the bed? Your father will arrive in a few moments. Will I serve him leftover potatoes for dinner? What will I give your father to eat?’

Jojo replied, ‘But, we do have potato curry; we shall eat bread with it. You know the situation in the city; it’s not easy to earn a living. Fakhra has cooked only boiled onions on her rusted stove. So, I gave the eggs to her.’ Javairia (Jojo) knew that until she took money out of her *gullak* and bought two eggs, the cloud of gloom would never disperse.

Talking to her father later she said: ‘Papa, when I was playing Ready-Go in the street yesterday, I accidentally put my foot on one of Farah’s shoes and the shoe was torn. I promised to get her a new pair of shoes. Should I give her money from my *gullak*?’

Her father replied, ‘No, don’t do that. I shall bring a pair of shoes. Does she wear the same shoe size as you?’

Jojo added happily, ‘And, if you can, bring flour along with you on your return.’ Her father smiled at her and went out.

One evening, Jojo’s father did not come home. ‘Mummy, it is seven now but father has not come back yet. He has never been so late.’

Her mother was concerned too. ‘I think both of us should go out to search for him.’

Just then the news on TV announced: 'There has been a bomb blast near the Banaras bridge which has killed 30 people and wounded 80. The police have arrested 50 suspects. We shall inform you more about this as further details arrive.'

'O dear God! May my father be safe and sound!' Her mother was also worried but, when she saw Jojo weeping, she took her into her arms. She could not bear to see her child weep. 'Mummy, will my Papa be alright?'

Jojo's father was finally found at a hospital. They were told that he had lost a lot of blood. He had a deep wound on his right leg. Her mother felt the ground slipping from under her feet. Jojo wept, 'Papa, open your eyes. Papa, I am Jojo, your Jojo. Look at me, I am here with you. Papa!'

She stretched her hand out to touch his foot, but could not get hold of his foot. 'Papa, your leg! Where is your leg? It's not here. Papa! Papa! Your leg!,' she cried.

Her mother stood there like a statue, thinking about what would happen to them next. By the grace of God, Jojo's father was once again well enough to earn a living for his family. He had been given a new support in place of the amputated leg; this support was in the form of Jojo. His daughter gathered passengers, from one stop to another; he only took care of his rickshaw.

Now, no passenger could dodge him for their fare. When the father's heart wanted to take pity on a passenger, and he wanted to give him a discount, Jojo prevented him from being magnanimous. She would say, 'Papa, you have been deprived of your leg. But, please do not deprive us of our right and do not let others snatch our right.' Her father would smile at her.

*A Visit*

SHAHNAZ ASGHAR

My mother and I were eagerly looking forward to my maternal granduncle's visit. As soon as the door opened, I was struck dumb by the sight of the elderly man. It was a wonder as our granduncle looked exactly like the Quaid-i-Azam. Mother often told us this, but I hadn't expected such a close resemblance. It was uncanny!

Later that day he said, 'Take me around my City of Lights Karachi tomorrow and I will feel as if I have seen the whole of my country. You may be surprised that I have called it my city. I don't live here now, but my ancestors and I have a strong bond to this city. My father was a well-known merchant of this city.'

So, with him, we visited the buildings of the important government and private institutions, hospitals, schools, and colleges. We witnessed the clean and smooth roads of our city, with traffic following the rules and staying in their respective lanes. There were well-pruned flowering trees on both sides of the roads. At the city court, we saw lawyers everywhere, holding the files of their clients in their hands and waiting calmly for their turns. A case was being heard in the courtroom, and the hearing was in its last stage. The judge issued his verdict according to the demands of justice. Both the losing and winning parties were satisfied. We saw business prospering at the port and at the fishery.

I told my granduncle that the ratio of diseases in such a big city was lower than in other places. There has been no case of



dangerous diseases in children, particularly polio, because of the government's special attention to the health department, an excellent system of cleanliness throughout the city, and the provision of quality and free medical facilities to all.

We told him that the government had implemented such a coherent system of *zakaat* and *ush'r* in the country that it provided help to every poor, needy, widow and orphan on his or her doorstep. The government had ordered such a crystal-clear system for banks and other monetary institutions that there was no corruption. Our police was ranked as the best in the world. There were no power outages because far-sighted rulers had planned ahead and already built many dams. We witnessed peaceful processions of various political parties. There was no sign of chaos or indiscipline anywhere. Then we went to Karachi University. We saw students quenching their thirst for knowledge with great devotion.

But, as soon as we drove out of the university, the car stopped with a jerk and, because of that jerk, I woke up. I was unable to see anything in the pitch dark. For a moment, I felt as if I was perhaps lying in a grave. I groped here and there. I felt the bed. Electricity had been suspended as usual. It was very dark. I reached for my mobile phone under my pillow and looked at the time. It was about 5 a.m. I was still intoxicated by the pleasantness of such a wonderful dream and my mind refused to come out of its spell. Then, I remembered that before I went to sleep that night, in a very dejected mood, I had watched scenes of the violent situation in Karachi on a news channel. Then, how did I see such a fanciful and contradictory dream? Perhaps it was my thirst and longing for such a positive state of affairs instead of the mess we are in. I felt like crying; tears from my eyes began to soak my pillow.

## *Safety*

ABDUL SABOOR

When Hussain's family and close relatives were killed in a bomb blast during a religious congregation, he was just three years old. As there was no relative to adopt him, he was sent to an orphanage called Dar-ul-Amaan, and then adopted by a childless couple. Professor Ali Raza and Sakeena Begum brought him up with so much love that the dim memory of his real parents was obliterated from his mind in a few years, and he began to consider Professor Ali Raza and Sakeena Begum as his real parents.

Ali Raza's story was also a strange one. At the time of the fall of East Pakistan, his family lived in Dhaka. Ali Raza was in class ten then. He migrated to Karachi after the tragic death of his family members at the hands of their fellow countrymen during the riots. On reaching Karachi, he resolved to start a new life. He rented a room in Mahmoodabad. Then he began his search for a livelihood, and got a job distributing newspapers in the mornings and evenings.

After completing his education, he started teaching at a college. College in the morning, and tuitions in the evening, made his life very busy. He became the most popular teacher for his students. Since he had no relatives of his own, his fellow teachers at the college took on the responsibility of finding him a wife. Thus, he married Sakeena Begum whose father, Agha Aurangzeb, had a cloth shop in Saddar and their family lived in Orangi Town.

When they remained deprived of the joy of parenthood, Ali Raza and Sakina Begum thought of adopting a child. It was in this way that Hussain came into their lives as their son. When the administration at Dar-ul-Amaan told the professor about Hussain's background, his heart began to feel an affinity with Hussain. When he brought Hussain home, he felt that little Hussain was just like himself. Ali Raza decided that he would leave no stone unturned in the upbringing of Hussain, and would raise him as a man who had no hatred towards anyone and who was completely free from prejudice of colour, race, language, and nationality. Sakeena understood her husband's emotions and brought Hussain up in this way.

Ten years passed in the twinkling of an eye. But, these years did not bring any good news for Karachi. During this time, the city was besieged by bullets, bombs, death, destruction, riots, and crime. When the situation in the city became worse and blood began to flow, Ali Raza could not help but see the anguished scenes of the past being replayed like a film.

Now twelve years old, Hussain was growing up amidst these circumstances. Today was the first day of his annual examination for class six. When Hussain returned from school, he began to anxiously wait for his father. It had been his routine to give his father a report about each paper of his annual examinations. When the professor heard him relate the whole paper, he would say, at the end, 'Very good, my son! You will stand first in this paper.' Hussain would feel as if his paper had actually been checked.

However, today, he was in hurry to tell his father about the paper he had just sat. This time the situation was very different. The professor had promised that if he stood first in the annual examination, he would get his son a mobile phone. Hussain had accepted this challenge. When the professor finally reached home, Hussain brought the question paper to him.



All the papers ended, one after the other. Ali Raza, Sakeena Begum, and Hussain began to wait for the day of the results. At last, the day arrived! Hussain was very excited. Ali Raza and Sakeena Begum sent him to school with a lot of prayers. The professor was so sure of his son standing first that he had taken leave from college for the day to buy Hussain's favourite mobile phone before he returned from school.

A short while after Hussain left for school, the professor and his wife left for the market on their motorcycle to buy a mobile phone. It took them a long time to find the mobile phone that Hussain wanted. After buying it, they left for home. They were only halfway home when the motorcycle began to stall. The professor stopped the motorcycle on the side of the road and muttered: 'It is out of petrol. Oh, I remember, the price of petrol has increased this month. Earlier, when I had the tank filled, I got some money back from one thousand rupee note but, this month, the tank could not be filled for even one thousand rupees. I thought I would get the tank filled later but I forgot. Half a kilometre down this road, there is a link road on the left and there is a petrol station on that link road.'

His wife was worried and said, 'This link road is notorious for robberies.' They had only gone a short distance when four masked motorcyclists emerged, riding on two motorcycles, on their left and right. They showed their weapons and made the professor stop his motorcycle. One of the masked persons asked his wife for her purse; she gave it to him without any resistance. The robbers were about to leave, but one of them caught sight of the shopping bag in her hand. He said, 'What is in the shopping bag?'

She said, imploringly, 'Please leave it. There is a mobile phone in it for my son.' The robber got off his motorcycle very quickly and pounced on the shopping bag. Sakeena Begum held the shopping bag to her chest saying, 'No, no!'

The professor shouted, 'Sakeena! Let them take it . . . give it to them!' But his remaining words were stuck in his throat. The last sound he heard was the sound of a pistol being fired. Professor Ali Raza and Sakeena Begum fell to the ground, severely wounded. The robbers escaped with their motorcycle, purse, and the mobile phone. Both were taken to hospital, but neither survived.

Hussain, as usual, arrived home after receiving the honour of standing first. But, a scene of misery awaited him. Agha Aurangzeb wanted to take the bodies of his daughter and son-in-law to Orangi Town but, at the request of the people of the area, he decided to have Professor Ali Raza and Sakeena Begum buried in the Mahmoodabad graveyard. Hundreds of people attended their funerals.

Tears welled up in Hussain's eyes. Several years earlier, his world has been shattered in the same way and he had been sent to Dar-ul-Amaan. Once again, Hussain left his home—this time seeking safety in his maternal grandfather's home.

## *Gunpowder*

SAHAR SHAH

My name is Hani. I am fourteen years old. I have completed the fifth grade at the government primary girls' school in my neighbourhood. There is no high school in my neighbourhood for girls to study further. Moreover, my mother is against the education of girls. She says, 'What will you achieve by getting an education? Enough is enough! Now learn how to do household chores for the family.' Therefore, these days, I am learning how to cook, sweep, sew clothes, knit, and do other household chores. My mother is always burdened worrying about my marriage. It is for this reason that she keeps insisting that my father earn more money and look for a boy who is earning well and who belongs to our caste.

Living in this old house in Nawan Kot, we have now become long-standing inhabitants of the area. The holes in the burlap curtain over our door have become so wide that I can see the uniformed men running outside very clearly through them. Why do these people come here? We had heard, from our elders, that this was a very prosperous and peaceful area. The people of this area were simple, honest, straightforward, and brave. They were very fond of games. Every young man of the area was keen on playing football and on boxing. Volleyball was their hobby, and football their talent. They made the ball 'dance' on their arms, hands, neck, and fingers with great dexterity; floated it with great skill on their knees and feet; and their 'header' shots could not be stopped by even an expert goalkeeper.



My great grandfather told us that there were sports clubs in every *mohallah* and street of Lyari. After Independence, the games in this area were stopped deliberately. Boxing and football clubs were closed and replaced by 'points'—dens of addiction—and hooligans who were armed and supported. Through intrigue, this peaceful, prosperous, and affluent area was pushed into the marsh of misery and unemployment. Now, it is just a facade of redeeming this area of thorns that they have sown themselves. They are moving around in our area without any hindrance, carrying weapons in our streets and *mohallahs*, disgracing us, trampling over our houses, laying the blame on our youth, and killing those who are our breadwinners. Have these uniformed men come to deliver us from our enemies? Our biggest enemy is ignorance, unemployment, and the strangeness and unfriendliness of those we considered our own, who are now trampling the sanctity of our votes. What have they done for the progress of this area?

If funds of millions of rupees are released for the development of our area, it is swallowed with a belch and intrigues come into play. On one side of our area, there is the Lyari Expressway; on the other side, there are broken and ruined roads which have one foot or two feet wide holes filled with filthy sewerage water causing numerous diseases.

Today, we have not cooked anything since morning. Yesterday, early in the morning, the police's guns were spewing bullets outside. We managed yesterday somehow or the other, but none of us—at home or even in our *mohallah*—had eaten anything except abuses, kicks, fists, and bullets. The noise of the bullets sometimes became loud and sometimes soft, but my hungry younger brothers' and sister's sounds of weeping did not become softer.

My father left the house for work—as a labourer—early yesterday morning, and has not returned as yet. He brings food items home in the evenings—flour, pulses, *gur*, *ghee*, milk, tea,



eggs, some vegetables. Sometimes he brings chocolate, *pakor*as, or biscuits for us, and *beeri* for himself. He only smokes *beeri*. I remember very well that my mother used to take some puffs of *beeri* on the pretext of lighting it. Once or twice, I also took a few puffs, as did my brother, Nauroz. That day, my mother had gone to the neighbours' house—maybe to borrow some salt or pepper. My father had been holding the *beeri* in his hand for a long time when Nauroz went running to him. He took the *beeri* from his hand and searched for a spark in the extinguished ash but, as soon as he moved his stick in the ash, he was attacked by a coughing fit. My father took the *beeri* from his hand and gave slapped him hard. Then he returned to his place and continued to take puffs of the *beeri*. Nauroz got up and saw his face in the broken mirror. I had been watching him while I was knitting in a corner of the room. He did not like to see himself in a mirror. Shahrukh Khan was his ideal and, since childhood, he wished to look like him. He used to ask me in childhood, 'Tell me, why am I dark-skinned? Why are my lips so fat? Why is my hair so curly? Will I look like Shahrukh Khan when I grow up? Will my hair become as long as his when I grow up? And will I be able to wear my hair in a ponytail?' But, as he grew up he understood the reality and began to take pride in being a Balochi Makrani: 'Wow! I am a Makrani of Lyari.'

Those who had been hit by the hoofs of Ranjeet Singh are trying to dominate these simple, straightforward, honest, and poor people of Lyari who are the descendants of the real guards and keepers of the salty sea and the heirs to Kharadar and Meethadar. When my father brings food, my mother cooks it at once and I lend her a helping hand with the small chores. But, two days have passed and my father has not yet come back. Perhaps they have shot him dead, or have put him in jail? Now, although I am not feeling hungry, I am feeling fear. Why has my father not returned? My mother is sitting by the extinguished grate, with waiting eyes fixed on the door.

The sun is about to set, but my father has not yet returned. There has been pitch-darkness in our house and our *mohallah* for two days. These ruthless people have refused to let us have access to water. Do they plan to have another Karbala? Suddenly, my brother stands before my mother, and says: 'Oh, let me go outside. Will you keep me starving? I have to bring food for all of us. I have to search for my father! Should we die sitting in the house?'

My mother's stony eyes begin to melt and tears begin to spring from them. 'O hungry child, indifferent to starvation! At least you are alive here. What will you do if some hungry bullet eats you up outside? I shall die at that very moment.'

The intensity of the blasts outside is increasing. Now, the bullets have become mortars. The whole atmosphere is filled with the smell of gunpowder. The blasts shake the earth, and our hearts are frightened. Mother lifts up both her hands and begins to curse them. 'May God destroy them! May the morsals of food in their mouths get stuck in their throats and choke them! May God curse that Chaudhry! May all the oppressors die on the same night! Long live Shah Noorani!' Cursing, she beats her chest with her hands.

'If these oppressors had died as a result of these curses, oppressions would have been eliminated,' said my brother. 'Move aside. I have to go out . . . it is better to die today than tomorrow. I am the Makrani of Lyari. I do not fear anyone.'

And my Nauroz crossed the door of the house with the speed of a bullet. Mother ran after him at the same speed. I also ran after them in fear, but stopped behind the burlap sack hanging on the door and peeped through the holes in the sack. The street outside was deserted except for Nauroz who was running and being chased by my mother. Pieces of stones, bricks, and glass had been scattered here and there. Carts were scattered on the road. There was an armoured vehicle and a police mobile at a

roundabout in the distance. The policemen were standing alert, carrying their guns in their hands.

My mother suddenly stops at the corner of the street. There is a lot of noise. The loud sound of slogans can be heard. And then the procession emerges. These are the women of Lyari. They have the dead bodies of their children in their hands. Funerals are held in front of the procession. All are wailing and crying bitterly, beating their chests, and raising slogans very passionately. My mother also, automatically, joins the procession, just as flowing blood automatically mixes with flowing water. The volume of the voices outside is rising . . . the sounds of the advancing steps . . . loud slogans: 'March . . . a life for a life . . . an eye for an eye. . . . Wake Lyari, wake!'



## *The Story of a Tree*

NUSRAT

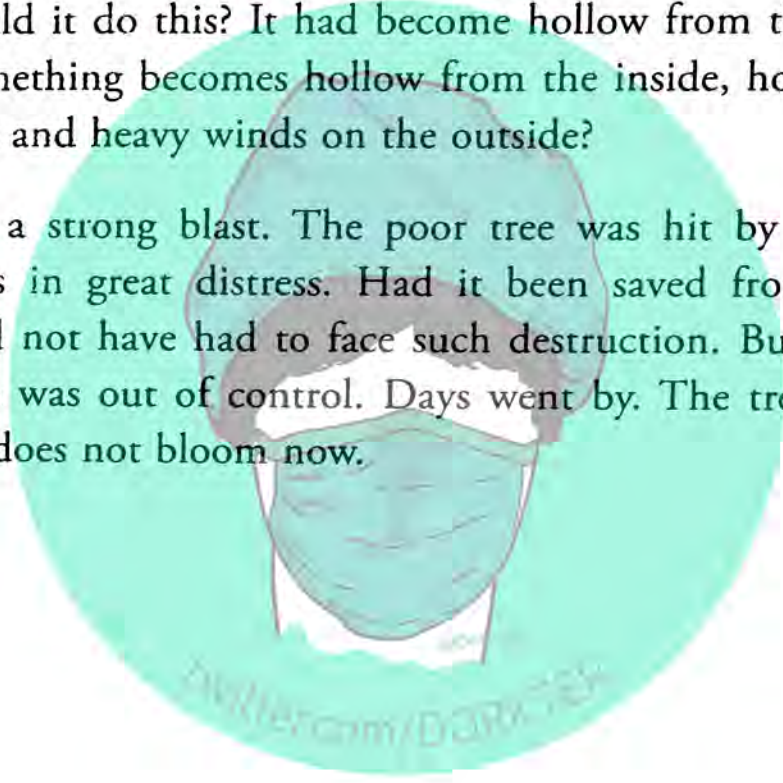
There were many lush green trees in the beautiful garden. Some were fruit trees and some were flower trees. There were all kinds of small and big trees. Some trees bloomed and some were sad and quiet. A hardworking and industrious gardener planted a plant among the lush, green, and blooming trees. He took good care of it. He watered it and cared for it with the sweat of his hard work, and enabled it to lead its own independent life and to bloom. He made sure that it would not be uprooted by slight or strong gusts of wind.

The gardener, who cared for it and who wanted to see it grow into a tall and strong tree, went away to a far-off place. The plant could not do anything. It just sighed on the inside and bore this great tragedy. The plant began to bloom and continued to grow, and became stronger and taller day by day, although it was still not strong enough to resist heavy storms and winds. People were surprised to see it bloom and blossom into a tall and strong tree. People began to lead a life of peace and harmony under its dense and cool shade. Anthems of love began to be sung. Birds began to swing, and sing sweet songs, on its beautiful and flexible twigs. In no time at all, the tree began to bear flowers and fruits. The whole garden began to smell sweet because of their fragrance.

One day, there was flashing lightning and thunder, and strong stormy winds blew. The tree missed the gardener very much. The storm continued to blow for seventeen days. At last, it ceased. The tree saved itself from the storm and withstood it with valour and courage. It had succeeded in its first trial. Gradually,

the wheel of time continued to revolve and the tree grew to be twenty-four years old. No one knows why its strong and big branches were eaten by termites from the inside. The tree did not know about it either. Once again, it was hit by another storm. Its time of trial had arrived. The tree did its level best to save itself. It shrank itself and continued to fight the opposite wind. But, for how long could it do this? It had become hollow from the inside. When something becomes hollow from the inside, how can it face storms and heavy winds on the outside?

Then, there was a strong blast. The poor tree was hit by a calamity and was in great distress. Had it been saved from termites, it would not have had to face such destruction. But, alas, the situation was out of control. Days went by. The tree still exists, but it does not bloom now.



## *Dilloo Makrani's True Story*

AKHTAR NASIMI

Perhaps it was during 1954–55 when one of my relatives sent a boy to me and said, 'This boy's uncle was a peon at my office, but he has got a job in Muscat. He is going there. I am sending this boy to you. Keep him with you for some months. Then I shall make arrangements for him. He knows how to work. You can see for yourself.'

He was almost fourteen years old. He was Makrani. He had curly hair and was tall with a handsome face. His eyes were very bright and his hair was brown. I asked him what his name was. He replied, 'Murad Dil!'

I asked, 'Murad Dil or Dil Murad?'

He answered, 'Murad Dil!'

I asked, 'What do people call you?'

'Dilloo!'

I asked, 'What kind of work can you do?'

He replied, with a feeling of great satisfaction, 'I can do all tasks. I can clean the house. I can clean utensils.' Then he looked around the house and said, 'May I have a look around the house?'

He looked around with confidence. He did not go into any room. Looking at them from outside, he said, 'I can clean all of



this.' Then he asked, 'When will I be a given meal? It is time for my meal.'

I laughed loudly and said, 'But it is not our meal time yet. It is still being prepared. When it is prepared, you will get your meal.'

'Well, I shall sit down.' That day, we were having fish. When he smelled fish, he shouted, 'I will not eat fish. I will remain hungry, but I will not eat fish.'

I asked him, 'Dilloo, why do you not like fish?'

He said, 'I am tired of eating fish. Back home, we get fish throughout the year. Sometimes, the fish is fresh and sometimes the fish is dried.' He ate the pulses, vegetables, and bread. He ate them gladly and then cleaned the dishes. After cleaning them, he went out. I saw that he was running around with the boys of the *mohallah* trying to catch a snapped kite. We were laughing; he was a strange boy. Gradually, he had made good friends with my seven-year-old daughter, Tasneem. He called her Bibi and brought stranded kites for her and taught her how to fly a kite. Bibi was teaching him *alif bay pay*, the Urdu alphabet.

One day I said, 'By now you must have learnt a lot.'

He said, with a lot of confidence, 'I have learnt everything.'

When I put my finger on *alif* and asked what it was, he said, 'A stick!'

'What? Has Bibi taught you this?'

'No, she calls it something else, but Mullah Ji had told me that if I had difficulty in learning it, I should call it a stick.'

Time went by. One day, our cook asked us for one month's leave. He had to go to his village to look after his sick mother. I thought that Dilloo might be of some help with the work. After breakfast the next morning, he insisted that he would clear the

table and clean it. I put two cups of tea on a tray and asked him to take them to the kitchen. He took them. There was the sound of breaking china. I hurried into the kitchen and saw that both the cups were broken and the tray was lying on the floor. I asked him angrily, 'What is this?' But, as I was in a hurry, I locked the house and went to school, leaving everything as it was. I told Dilloo that we would return at half past one. On our return, we found Dilloo at the gate. Dilloo said, with pleasure, that he had had his meal at the neighbour's house!

I said, 'That is very wrong. You should have waited.'

He replied, 'But I was feeling hungry.' I became quiet.

Later, our neighbour laughingly said, 'Please don't mind. I have told him to have lunch with us daily.'

How could we think ill of him since his lunchtime was half past twelve and we returned home at half past one? After the experience of the first day, we forbade him from entering the kitchen. He only did the cleaning. Surprisingly, we had become accustomed to him. Sometimes he sang, sometimes he narrated tales. When he went out, he ran after kites. Sometimes he had a row with the boys. He used to bring the torn kites to Bibi and say, with pride, that he had caught them. He had become popular in our *mohallah*. When the neighbourhood women went to the bazaar, they took him along. He used to play with the children. Although he did not make progress in learning to read or write, he had made a lot of progress in mathematics. He had learnt to count from 1 to 10. However, he drew one stick for 1, two sticks for 2, and ten sticks for 10.

One day, his uncle returned and took him away. He wept bitterly but had to go. We made him promise that he would not eat fish and would not go to Mullah Ji. Bibi, the women of the *mohallah*, and I all gave him gifts. I gave him clothes. His uncle said that he had grown up and so he should do some kind of work to



bring some money home. After he had left, the *mohallah* became desolate. We missed him and remained sad for many days. Then, as is the case of the world, we forgot him.

A long period passed. My daughter, Tasneem, became a doctor and began to work at the Civil Hospital. One day, when she was in the hospital ward, she saw a feeble patient lying on one of the beds. His hair was curly. His face looked familiar. He was also looking at her attentively. Tasneem looked at his history card. The name was Murad Dil. Tasneem asked him, 'Are you Dilloo?'

He screamed, 'Bibi! Bibi! Look how sick I have become! I have become sick because I ate fish.' Tasneem comforted him. He was weeping. 'Bibi, I called at your house, but you were not there.' (We had changed our house.) 'And then I went to Makran again.'

Tasneem comforted him that he would be alright. But his medical history stated that there was no chance of his survival and that he should be given anything he wanted to eat; there was no need for medicines or any restrictions. Tasneem had him discharged from hospital with the consultation of his doctor, and brought him home with her. We took great care of him—of his food and ensured he got enough rest. But on the fourth day, the servant told us in the morning that he had left saying that he was not feeling well and was going to the hospital. Tasneem arrived at the hospital and saw him on a bed. His condition had worsened. He could not speak properly, and died the same day. His relatives arrived. Tasneem asked them how much money they would need for his burial. They said, '170 rupees,' which she gave to them. We were all very sorry for his death.

A few days later, our servant came to us in the evening, terrified, and told us that 15 or 20 Makranis had come and that they wanted to talk to Bibi. They were Dilloo's relatives, and they wanted to thank Dr Tasneem for taking great care of him by taking him to her home and comforting him.



Whenever we remember him, we remember how he jumped like a kangaroo, ran like a hare, and had no concern for wages. He remained happy and gay. He sang loudly. Tasneem told us that his liver had been destroyed and his kidneys had failed. No one knows how he reached such a state. He was barely thirty years old. Now, Karachi has also changed. Now, no stranger can live in another's house in such an informal way. Now, every person is afraid of the other.

## *Flower Bracelets*

RABIA SHAHEEN

The darkness, prevailing over the limitless vastness of the sky, prepared to depart. Rays of the morning awoke by stretching their golden arms like a new bride. The morning breeze, with the fragrance of new buds, stirred as though with coquetry. Small sparrows sang of morning in their nests. A new day, a new sun, and a new light had brought a new hope and a new message for the earth.

Sajju was walking on the footpath towards his destination with a basket of flowers on his head. Today, his feet moved faster than before. His heart was filled with longings and his eyes were inebriated with dreams. At this hour, the roads of the city were almost desolate. The manner of this city, on the shore of the sea, was out of the ordinary. Right after the fall of night, all the lights and all the festivities awoke, and the people of the city refused to receive morning until the golden sun descended into their courtyards and peeped through their windows to herald the news of a new day.

Occasionally, a car passed by and he raised his right hand to his forehead to greet those sitting in the car. If there was some gentle person in the car, he smiled and bowed his head a little. Otherwise, most of the car drivers passed by him very fast. When someone did not respond to his greeting, he called them names. But, there was something different today. Joy had bloomed flowers in, and on, his whole body and he was showering smiles even on those who cast their eyes of contempt on him.

Sajju belonged to the interior of Sindh. He had come to Karachi in search of employment. His father was a poor farmer—a helpless and powerless farmer who was a victim of the landlords. When Sajju became old enough to understand, he was disgusted with the system that was prevalent in his *goth* (village). He decided to remove the shackle of slavery around his neck and came to Karachi. Soon, Sajju became tired of doing small jobs and working as a labourer and decided to start his own business. His father handed his whole life's savings over to him—which he had planned on spending on his sister's wedding. Sajju promised to return the money when the business flourished. He would buy fresh flowers from the same florist, and make flower bracelets which he sold. He set up his stall at a famous roundabout of the city. The flower bracelets and bouquets, made of fresh flowers, sold like hot cakes.

Sajju was very glad that his business was flourishing. He wrote a letter to his father that he would visit the village soon. Before going to the village, Sajju bought many gifts for his family. He bought an *ajrak* for his father, and clothes, shoes, and several other things for his mother and sister. While walking in the bazaar, his eyes caught sight of a stall of bangles. Upon seeing the flashing and twinkling bangles bathed in floodlights he, at once, thought of Rani. Rani was his love. He would send his father to her house to ask for her hand.

While making flower bracelets, Rani's innocent face always remained before his eyes. He made one bracelet for Rani. He wrapped the fragrant bracelet in a piece of newspaper and put it in his pocket. He had informed Rani about his arrival, and was sure that she would be waiting for him anxiously.

The condition of the city was not at all good. Strikes, protests, processions, riots, closing down of markets, and curfews were a daily feature of this city. Sajju neither knew anything of the politics of the country, nor did he participate in any procession.



He had nothing to do but earn money for his parents, sister, and Rani. Now, as his business had flourished, he was satisfied. He thought that he would add some more money and marry his sister off with pomp and show. After that, he would bring his father and mother to the city and would take a marriage procession to Rani's house. He would bring his Rani to this city of glittering lights and show her around the whole city.

While holding the hand of these beautiful dreams, he was directing himself towards the big roundabout of the city. This was a busy roundabout of the city, situated at a bridge near a large sewage drain. When he reached the roundabout, the light of the sun had spread fully. It was unusual but the whole bazaar was still closed and the footpath was also empty. He took out the flowers from the basket and began to arrange his stall. He had been arranging his stall over there for a week. After a while, some labourers also came and sat on the footpath. It was their routine; they sat on this footpath every morning and waited for someone to give them their day's work.

Sajju had made friends with many of these labourers. Many were strangers in the city, like him. They had left their hometowns for this industrial city in the hope of a golden future. All had similar dreams in their eyes.

It was very hot by now, but the hustle and bustle of the roundabout was not restored. Many of the shops of the bazaar were closed, even now. There were very few vehicles on the road. Sajju was very surprised at this. Perfume sellers, astrologists, bangle sellers, and fruit and vegetable sellers sitting near him had also got tired of waiting for customers.

The shopkeepers, too, had tired of sitting idle. Meanwhile, a group of enraged people emerged from a street. They were carrying staffs and clubs in their hands and, entering the shops fearlessly, began to wreak havoc on the items in the shops. The labourers sitting on the footpaths began to run here and there.

The shopkeepers also began to close their shops. It was a scene of utter chaos. The enraged people began turning carts upside down. Vegetables and fruit were scattered on the road, and were trampled underfoot. The bangle sellers' bangles became heaps of shattered glass. Some enraged persons advanced towards a befuddled Sajju and lifted his basket of flowers. 'You rascal! Don't you know that there is a strike today? How dare you come to the market today?'

The bazaars had already been closed for two days earlier that week. If the labourers working for daily wages didn't work, how would they eat? Sajju snatched the basket of flowers from their hands—it was not a basket of flowers but his father's life savings. It was his father's only asset; the joy of his family, his hopes, his love, his dreams were all drowning. For several minutes, he could not believe his eyes. He felt as if he was standing alone at the roundabout full of people, and there was no one around him. He was alone—quite alone. Owing to the intensity of his anger, his eyes began to burn like coals. In an effort to control his anger, the bones of his clenched jaw jutted out. He felt as if all the blood in his entire body had gathered in his brain. He knew that his parents were waiting for him, with their eyes cast on the path coming from the city. His love was also longing to feast her eyes on him. Thinking of Rani, he took the piece of newspaper containing the flower bracelet out of his pocket. He was not the raja of a state, therefore he did not deserve Rani. He crushed the bracelet, made of his yearnings, tore the flowers asunder, and handed them over to the dirty and filthy water of the drain. The bouquets and flower bracelets made by his hands floated away on the water.

No one knows what was going through Sajju's mind. He remained standing by the wall of the bridge, and continued to look at the drain with burning eyes. And, then, he jumped into the drain. The Sajju who had rebelled against the traditional system of his village, who had come to Karachi with a yearning

to improve his life, who had come out of his home—along with the new sun in the morning—with dreams of a golden future, had now become a part of the filthy drain.



## *Shared Anxieties*

SHAISTA REHMAN

The doorbell rang at a stretch two or three times. Razia Begum concluded her prayers by saying *salaam* and called to her daughter in a slightly angry tone, 'Saima, my daughter, open the gate. Someone has been ringing the bell for a long time. But don't open the gate before checking who it is first.'

Saima went running to the gate; when she came back, she had a plate of *biryani* in her hand. Its smell was enough to make one feel hungry. Saima said that the *biryani* had been sent by the neighbouring Pathan family. Her mother smiled and said, 'Our neighbours are very hospitable, and whenever they make a good meal, they send it to their neighbours.'

Then, Razia Begum folded the prayer mat and, after telling Saima to put the *biryani* in the kitchen, went towards the stairs to call the *maasi* who was sweeping the roof. Razia Begum reached the roof and called out to Maasi Rubina, 'Have you finished sweeping?'

Gathering the garbage, Maasi Rubina said, 'Yes, *addi*, I have finished.' Since Maasi Rubina was a Sindhi, she called Razia Begum *addi* instead of *baji*. Razia Begum also liked the word *addi* very much. When Maasi Rubina returned home, late in the evening, Razia Begum went into the kitchen and began to prepare supper.

Razia Begum's small family consisted of five members: her husband Ashfaq Sahib, son Asad, daughter Saima, Ashfaq Sahib's father Mushtaq Sahib, and herself.

Ashfaq Sahib returned home at about seven at night. Today, he looked clearly worried. Upon seeing him worried, Razia Begum also became worried and asked him, 'What is the matter?'

Ashfaq Sahib replied, 'The whole city has been gripped by violence since the evening. All businesses have been closed.'

Razia Begum became more worried and said, 'But why is this violence taking place? There must be some reason.'

Ashfaq Sahib said, 'The same old fight among Punjabis, Muhajirs, Sindhis, Balochs, Pathans; all are fighting against one another. If a person of someone's group is killed, he kills the people of the other community in revenge. This is happening in the whole city.'

Razia Begum said, with great concern, 'Asad has not yet returned home from his coaching centre.' And, she began to pray silently for the safe return of her son. While waiting for him, Razia Begum felt that each moment was as long as a century.

Asad came back at about eight. 'Abba! There is news throughout the area that a Sindhi has been murdered, and Sindhis will attack our area tonight.' On the one hand, Razia felt great relief on her son's safe return but, on the other hand, her worry was multiplied by this news.

Asad's grandfather, unaware of this conversation, came out of his room wearing a white *shalwar* and *kurta* and cap to go to the mosque to say his prayers. Razia Begum said to him, 'You should not go to the mosque today. You can say your prayers at home.'

He asked why. Then he looked at everyone's worried faces. 'What has happened?' he asked.

Razia Begum said, 'Abba! The whole city is gripped by violence. Some people have forcibly had all businesses closed. There is pin drop silence on all the roads, streets, and *mohallahs*. All the people are confined to their homes. That's why we don't want

you to go to the mosque. No one knows when this violence will get worse.' Her father-in-law sat down on the charpoy in the courtyard, very grieved.

Saima asked, 'Dada! Why are you sad? These acts of violence have become a daily routine of the city.'

At this, her grandfather sighed deeply and said, 'Yes, my child! It is matter of daily routine for you but for us old people, who have seen the early days of this city of Karachi, it is very painful.' Then, their grandfather looked at Asad and Saima in turn and said, 'My children! You don't know that our Karachi was a haven of peace. He who came here for livelihood never slept hungry. People did not lock the doors of their houses because no one stole anything from anyone's house. There was never pin drop silence in this city at midnight. We called it the City of Lights—a city where there was no darkness, even after the sunset. And, people used to travel on the roads late at night in peace and calm. In this city, nobody faced any danger to his honour, soul, or property. Who knows whose evil eye has cast its influence upon this city—that the festivities of our Karachi have ceased!'

Razia Begum was surprised to see that even after the situation had been normalized, Maasi Rubina did not come to their house to work. Concerned, she went to her neighbour Shakeela's house, because Maasi Rubina worked there too. Razia Begum asked Shakeela whether Maasi Rubina had come to her house. At this Shakeela said angrily, 'Why would she come? She is a Sindhi. These people have created the tumult in the city.'

When Razia Begum returned home with a heavy heart, she was surprised to see the scene in front of her. Maasi Rubina was sweeping the courtyard. When she saw Razia Begum, she left the broom, stood up, and greeted, '*Assalam-o-alaikum, addi!*'

Razia Begum responded to her greeting and said, 'Where have you been for four days?'

Maasi Rubina said, '*Addi!* There were riots throughout the city. And, I haven't slept for four nights. There was a rumour in our *goth* that Muhajirs could attack our area any time and they would kill all the Sindhis of the *goth*. *Addi!* Now tell me how I could leave my little children alone over there?'



## *The Patriot*

SYEDA SHAKEEL

In this age of 'each man for himself', when every individual seems to be busy in his struggle for survival, it is hard to think about service to humanity; in a city like Karachi, this task seems not only hard but impossible. Despite that, when I, intoxicated by the passion of patriotism, offered my services for this noble cause, I experienced a feeling of pride and satisfaction. And, naturally, I began to consider this deed of mine as a great goodness, with a sense of pride bordering on arrogance and haughtiness. It started unnoticeably, the way an ant creeps on a black stone on a dark night.

I asked myself, 'Surely, there is a latent desire in my unconsciousness to receive admiration and praise.' I thought so and, once again, turned back to look at the suspicious-looking man lurking near the relief items. He was still looking at me. This time I began to feel angry at him. Perhaps I felt some hatred as well. My inner feelings must have been evident from my face because he turned his eyes away from me. I looked at him very closely. Drops of sweat were shining on his dirty forehead. He was wearing a loose, dust-coloured *shalwar* and shirt and sandals. The pockets of his worn-out shirt had been mended with black thread. By his features, he looked to me like a thief. I thought to myself, 'It is because of such people that our country is hit by calamities over and over again. First the earthquake, and then this flood!'

A woman's voice caught my attention, 'Please, excuse me! Please, I am in a hurry. There are some blankets, clothes, and ration

for the victims of the floods in my car.' I responded politely and asked Abdullah to take the relief items from the car. And, I instructed Kashif to register the items and give a receipt to the woman. Abdullah and Kashif are my fellow students from Karachi University. We had been working at this relief camp for the last three days. The camp was set up under the supervision of a flood relief NGO. Our responsibilities included receiving the relief packages, sorting them out, and registering them. Had Kashif's family seen him working hard thus, they would have surely been befuddled. Normally, he doesn't even lift a finger to drink water and calls the servants of his house for all kinds of work; now, not only was he performing each of his tasks with extreme responsibility and cheerfulness, but his face was illuminated like that of any true patriot.

Once again, I was reminded of that man, lurking about like a thief. I saw that he was slowly advancing towards the heap of relief goods. When he found me looking at him, he stood still—as if I had caught him red-handed. I thought, 'He should, indeed, be caught red-handed.' And then I began to look straight ahead, but I was watching him closely from the corners of my eyes. Exactly according to my expectations, he again began to move towards the heap of relief goods. After a short while, he was standing near the goods. Then, suddenly, he took his sandals off near the heap and ran as fast as he could towards the exit. What was this? I was utterly confused. Then I came to my senses and heard my own voice, but it sounded as if it was coming from a far-off desert. 'Kashif, make out a receipt for one pair of sandals and write "patriot" in the column for the name.'

*Island of Filth*

ISHRAT AFSHAN

The summer sun was shining over his head. Martin had awakened, but he had been tossing and turning in his bed for an hour with his eyes closed. He was lost in thought about his past, present, and future. Perhaps, he was trying to close his eyes from his visions of the past, present, and future but he failed in that effort. He found himself unable to go to work. What was his life about? What was his job, that made everyone feel prejudiced against his ancestors?

'Father, get up! Mother is asking, 'Aren't you going to go to work today?' His son broke his train of thought.

'Hmm . . . oomph! Yes, I will get up.' His sentence was characterized by gloom. He had to abandon the comfort of his bed, because he was not alone. There were four other persons with him, and he was responsible for feeding them. He got up reluctantly and went to the washroom nearby. Its creaking door sounded like an old person. It, too, seemed to desire retirement. But, the inhabitants of his house did not allow it a moment's rest. They had their own obligations which made them use this decrepit door. He washed his hands and feet and went into the kitchen in the corner of the courtyard. His wife, Mary, was serving a cup of tea and half a slice of salty bread to everyone. She placed a slice of bread and a cup of tea before him as well. He began to eat his breakfast silently. Mary mentioned various things that were needed for the children, and he was lost in his own thoughts.

‘What is the matter?’ Mary was perplexed by his indifference to her words. With his eyes full of gloom, he looked at Mary for a while and then, heaving a deep sigh, asked Mary a strange question she had not expected. ‘Mary, have you ever thought about this? We are getting our children educated. We want to see them grow up as great people but they will always be called the children of a sweeper, a filthy person.’

‘What has happened to you, Martin? Why are you thinking such things?’ she asked restlessly.

‘I do not think in these terms. Mary, it is society that thinks about this in such a way. When our children have got their education and have got some employment, they will either have to keep mum about their forefathers or, if they speak about them, it will make their lives miserable.’

‘Why are you saying such things? You used to say good things. . . .’ Mary was about to finish what she was going to say when the three children came out of the room wearing clean uniforms and went out of the house saying good-bye to their parents with smiles on their faces.

Mary and Martin looked at them without saying a word. Today, neither of them smiled. One’s face exhibited a look of confusion; the other’s silence.

‘What is the matter? Tell me, at least.’ Mary was impatient to know the reason for his worry.

Martin closed his eyes because of the anguish, and entrusted the pain of his heart to his words.

‘Yesterday, I was cleaning the porch of Zubair Sahib of Soldier Bazaar. Our children usually come to that porch on their way back from the school. I could not bear the fact that my children were sitting in the sun. I requested Begum Sahiba’s cook to allow the children to sit inside. Mary, our children were not



even sitting on the sofa. They know their social status. They were just sitting on the carpet in the TV room. After a while, I heard Begum Sahiba shouting. If only I had not had my children seated there! If only I had not heard the shouting of Begum Sahiba! If only I were deaf!' Martin's face exhibited the anguish of a helpless father.

'Who has seated them here?' Begum Zubair's voice was so loud that it felt like it was shaking the walls of the house. The cook, embarrassed, came into the TV room.

'Actually, Begum Sahiba, it's very hot outside. I seated them here upon Martin's request.' He was as confused as a robber caught red-handed.

'Idiot, you have seated these filthy children on such an expensive Iranian carpet! You could not find another place to seat them!' Begum Sahiba looked like she would swallow the cook whole.

'But, Begum Sahiba, these are very neat and clean children.' The cook could not see the filth stuck to the innocent children. He stammered with surprise, looking towards the children.

'Fool! They may be neat and clean, but they are the children of a sweeper. Who knows how much filth is attached to their bodies and clothes. Can those who clean gutters be clean? Take them out at once and seat them outside. In future, if they come in, you will find yourself out of my house forever. Understand?' Begum Sahiba had spewed her venom. Martin's children looked at her innocently. They were clueless about the filth attached to their bodies—because of which Begum Sahiba was so angry.

'Yes, Begum Sahiba, I will do as you say. In future, I will never commit such a mistake.'

'He took the children outside, and I took them home. Mary! I did learn one thing yesterday. We do not become neat and clean even after taking a bath, and people are repelled by us. Even after

we have taken a bath a hundred times, they would never seat us with themselves. Have any one of them thought that if we do not remove the filth from their homes, where will they hide this filth? If we take a single day off, the odour of garbage spreads all around the houses of these people. If we refuse to clean the garbage, no one can imagine what the condition of these neat and clean houses would be. I wish to cry out and tell the whole city that we are not a bundle of filth but your mind is an island of filth, and this filth cannot be removed by any sweeper of the world.' Martin shed bitter tears, with his head bowed down, while Mary cried, leaning against the wall for support.

## *God's Decision*

AFAQ SAMEE

We lived in a part of the densely populated city of Karachi in which we believed no one could harm us. Here, no one knew anything about anyone, who he was or what he did. Nobody needed to know about each other because those are the activities of idle people. Also, we never felt any such need. We did not bother who was a target . . . it was just a game of numbers. We were three—you, me, and him—and there were five rooms in the flat. We were ordered to always live in separate rooms and, when we were to go out for a job, we were to gather in the central room. We were not fully acquainted with one another. No one knew where the other had come from. Then came the time we had been waiting for. We were ordered to get ready.

The city of two colours: one side of the hill was different from the other side. It had different colours in each corner. It had been divided into parts. Sometimes, one part was closed, sometimes the other, and sometimes another. But, we were not bothered about it. Sometimes, the people of one side died, and sometimes the people of the other side died. The area where people died was closed. However, if someone mourned or called a strike, a big part of the city was paralyzed. It happened when we worked at a stretch. Then, after an interval of some days, we went out to do our jobs. All were accustomed to the miserable conditions of the city. The authorities of the city began to lose their influence.

However, it was very rare that a spark of fire reached our part of the city. If it happened, it was brought under control at once. They thought that the human beings who lived here were more

important than others. Perhaps this area had no identity of its own, but the people had their identity. And then we were ordered to leave our houses.

We were unaware of the source of the orders, and we had never tried to find out who was issuing these orders. To do so was not included in the job agreement. Some people said he—not *him*, he is not the one—he is another person who issues orders to him, who then issues the orders to us. I had heard that he ran a school for the mentally handicapped. Then I came to know that he had a business abroad. We were his employees and he took care of our needs. It was enough for us. Every person has to do something or the other to survive. If we killed two or four useless people for this, what wrong did we do to anybody? People are, after all, destined to die. It does not matter whether we kill them or God kills them.

It is his decision. We are nobody to interfere. He also wants annihilation—for eternal life. He wants to kill all human beings.

That night, we performed our task. We went to various areas and fired our guns indiscriminately—without any purpose and without any provocation. We heard some wailing and crying amidst the cracks of the bullets; these sounds were part of the routine. They were not painful for us. We had no permission to feel anything. Also, we had nothing to do with those who died. We did not bother whether the dying ones were men, women, or children, young or old. We did not bother about their language, race, caste, tribe, or religion.

We returned. Nobody stopped us on the way. I had heard that, in that area, there were some people like us whom nobody stops no matter what they do. We were all free.

We switched on the TV in the central common room. Baseless and absurd news was being telecast regarding the incidents. We talked with one another minimally and only when necessary. We



had a restriction on talking too much. We continued to drink coffee with disgust. Suddenly, the news was telecast for which we were waiting very anxiously. He raised the volume. He smiled. I swallowed a piece of pizza and, after taking a sip of coffee, began to watch closely. A channel was showing CCTV footage. We began to evaluate our performance. We started pointing out each other's mistakes and began to argue with one another. We were very excited and we rejoiced. The anchors were more excited than we were. They were calling us devils, terrorists, murderers, cruel, ruthless, beasts, heinous, and so on. They were leaving no stone unturned to create hatred against us in the hearts of the people, so that they might shoot us, but we were laughing.

He spoke, 'Behold, I waved my repeater gun in a victorious way facing the camera so that they may identify me. They will now search for these faces, despite knowing that our faces were not real.'

I said, 'Why am I feeling no fear today?'

'O mister! In our profession he who is afraid is as good as dead!' At that very moment, the TV began to telecast news about a Bollywood item song. We laughed heartily.

In the last hours of the night, when we went to our rooms, I checked my room thrice times, for the first time, to check that the door was shut properly even though we always locked our room doors before sleeping. Our rooms had been given decorated in such a way that it seemed as if it was night, even during the day. The walls and doors had been painted in dark colours, as was the ceiling—like in a film studio. The windowpanes were black, and the glass was covered with dark curtains. The nature of our job was such that we remained awake during the night and slept soundly during the day.

The murder and massacre in the city continued to increase. We were to kill seven persons daily. We were safe, nor was it difficult

for us. The situation in the city was favourable to us, and some powerful notable men were our supporters and helpers. Nobody had the courage to lay their hands on us.

‘You had once said that you suspected that they knew about our flat and they had identified us.’ He had become indignant upon hearing those words. Why was that night, which had changed by then into morning, frightening me? I wet the bed in fright. That night, we had shut ourselves in our rooms after getting angry at one another. We did not talk to one another for several weeks; we just looked at each other with silent eyes and did our work like robots.

Then, orders were issued: Now take rest. We forgot everything and engaged ourselves in entertainment, as if nothing had happened. Several big events passed when we expected to receive orders, but no orders were issued. No one knows why he did not give orders.

Then, when all became normal, we received the same message. Quickly, we all got ready. We cleaned our guns. We went out of the house, reached the spot we had been told about, and began to do our work. During that time, our ears were heedless to any sound. But, I saw a person—before this I had never seen anyone dying after shooting him. We were neither allowed to, nor did we need to do so. But, my eyes unintentionally met the eyes of the dying young man and his young and pretty wife who was spread out over his body, her wailing and mourning beauty draped over him. His fear had changed into terror. He and his young five- or six-year-old son looked at me. I looked at them, and I began to feel my hands go numb. Colourful packages were lying scattered near them, which showed that they had come out to celebrate a birthday—gifts wrapped in colourful paper and unused balloons.

I was startled when my companions shook me and began to seat me in the vehicle.



When we reached the house, he reprimanded me. 'What did you do there? You are forgetting the rules and regulations of your job.'

'Oh, you just reminded us! We were ordered to shoot you in such a case. We also made a mistake.'

'Both of you made a mistake!' He was enraged. He was our chief. He was the actual recipient of the orders. That is why we kept mum. It was his right to say such words. Then, after a while, we watched our footage on various channels and kept making the usual comments; when we got tired, we shut ourselves in our rooms.

I don't know how long I was awake and thinking. I knew that I was violating my agreement. I was revolting against the agreement by thinking about the dying. I had seen such a strange brightness in the eyes of the dying young man that did not extinguish until his last breath. I had heard that it was not so. Eyes, like a fallen star, become dark after a flash. But, that had not happened. They had contained no imploration, no pleading, no mercy, no fear. They only had a pain in them that reflected that a dream had been shattered—a dream that he wanted to see realized, and was closing his eyes reluctantly.

I got up and began to pace around the room restlessly. There was nothing in the room that could have soothed me. Our weapons were locked away in a safe. The weapons were retrieved from us after each performance. We were not allowed to come out of our rooms after we had entered our rooms at night. The room had filled with the fragrance of *sheesha* and wine. My restlessness reached its height. I wanted to end my life. But, there was nothing in the room which would have eased my task. At that moment, something happened that had not happened before. There was a knock—at the main door of the flat, or it was a knock at the door of my room. It was you, him, or someone else . . . either he who issued orders to us or he who issued

orders to him. For the first time, I stepped forward to open the door knowing that we had been instructed to stay in our beds in such a situation. But, I failed to open the door. It dawned upon me that someone had closed the door from outside, or it had closed automatically right after we entered our rooms at night. Now, I could not do anything except obey the divine will. I spread myself on my bed. Fear after fear, thought after thought, wandering in the jungle of thoughts, I slept forgetting all—once and for all.

A TV anchor is revealing a secret with a smile on his face. A dead body has been found in a flat near the shore of the sea. After a while, there is more breaking news. Not one dead body, but three dead bodies—two men and one woman. A policeman is issuing a statement that two of them look like they could be foreigners. Some people are raising questions. Who were these people? Where did they come from? Since when had they been living here? How many violent incidents of the city were they involved in?

Some people did know; they only knew that we were living here for this task. But, they would never know who we were, because we ourselves did not know who we were and why we did this and whom we obeyed. Perhaps, it was the decision of God—for the people of this city who were together but did not want to live together.



## *Who Killed Kolachi?*

ISHFAQ AHMAD

In the village of Kolachi, everyone lived together in love and peace. They helped one another in times of need and trouble. Actually, it was all because of the old woman, Kolachi, who considered all the inhabitants of the village her sons and daughters. It was she who infused the people of this village with a spirit of love for others. She often said, 'All have equal rights on this earth.' Kolachi had a neighbouring sea which was always surging. The men of this village went to this sea early in the morning to reap the fruits of their hard work. The women engaged themselves in other chores, and Kolachi moved here and there meeting all her children and praying for their livelihoods.

One day, when the people of Kolachi returned from the sea, the nets of some had more fish than those of others. This happened again on the second and third days. One of the people, whose net contained fewer fish, said, 'Actually, I reached the spot where I cast my net late. Someone else had cast his net there first, and my fish are fewer as a result of this. If he had not cast his net in my spot, I would have caught more fish.' All those whose nets contained fewer fish agreed with what he said.

The person whose net contained a large number of fish said, 'Does the sea belong to you? It belongs to God Who is the Provider. Whoever wishes to earn his livelihood here may cast his net anywhere. I was lucky. Therefore, I got a large number of fish. You were unlucky. Therefore, you got a lesser number of fish. I will cast my net in the same spot tomorrow as well.'

At this, the first man said, 'I will see how you cast your net over there! I will break your hands! You have snatched my spot and now you say that I am unlucky!'

The next day, the first man went to the sea earlier. He found the other person already there, casting his net. He was filled with fury against the encroacher and shouted, 'I forbade you to fish in my spot. You did not follow my order. Now, I will show you the result of your actions.' Saying that, he called out loudly, 'Is there someone who will side with me for my rights? Is there anyone who will help me take this cruel encroaching man to his doom?' Upon hearing his call, other men began to gather around him.

They began to say, 'He is right. Our nets also caught fewer fish because someone else had cast his net at our spot yesterday. We cannot bear this injustice. Therefore, your right is our fight. We shall stand by you.' Upon hearing this, the other person also raised his voice to call others for help. In response to his call, and to the sight of the fury of the supporters of the first person, those whose nets had a large number of fish gathered around the second person and announced that they would side with him.

Now, all abandoned their nets and fell to fighting one another. They hit each other with whatever their hands got hold of. They beat one another hard. At last, all fell down exhausted. All had been wounded and were bleeding, but they returned to their village empty-handed saying that they would settle the score the next day. No one thought of catching fish during the scuffle.

When Kolachi caught sight of these wounded people, she asked what had happened. All repeated the story of the encroachment. Kolachi gathered them all at one place and counselled them saying, 'It is bad to fight over livelihood. God abhors when someone stands in the way of another's livelihood. This village is common to all. Therefore, the sea is also common to all. Don't think about capturing it. Look for your livelihood together, with patience, as before.' But, both groups, boiling in the fire

of wrath, did not pay heed to Kolachi's advice and went to their homes determined to take revenge. One of the groups developed contact with other nearby villages from which they expected to receive some help. Some got weapons from them. They employed some people in the group whose only task was to fight and harm the other group. In short, no one directed himself to the sea in search of his livelihood now, but all concentrated on preparing to avenge themselves.

Kolachi approached each of them. She implored them to adopt the path of peace and forbearance—but in vain. All were angry at the usurpation of their fishing spots and were burning with the fire of revenge. Kolachi wept unceasingly, but no one paid attention to her imploring.

At last, what had been feared took place. Both the groups were engaged in a fierce fight. The fight seemed to be endless. They gave one another severe beatings. When they were exhausted, they returned to their homes. But, then, another problem emerged. The people of the opposite groups were neighbours. How could they be safe? At night, a person of one group might kill a person of the other group while he was sleeping alone in his home. Therefore, they divided themselves into different areas. Each group considered itself safer in its own area. But, how could the need for a livelihood be quenched by fighting? A person of one group took his fishing net and left for the seaside. But, in the evening, it was his dead body which returned home. No one knew who had murdered him, but it was said that some people of the opposite group found him alone and killed him. What was the result? Each group began to cast its eyes upon the other group. As soon as someone got a chance, he killed a person of the opposite group. The village was filled with such a great terror that the people began to fear one another.

One night, it was Kolachi's dead body which was received. Her face had been disfigured. All the parts of her body were wounded and bleeding. The chiefs of both groups gathered, and

all expressed sorrow and deep pain over this incident. Kolachi was buried with honour. Someone raised a question about who might have killed Kolachi. Someone said, 'The area from which Kolachi's dead body was found belongs to the opposite group. That group might have a hand in her murder.' The representatives of that group swore that it was not the doing of any of its members, and someone from the other group might have killed Kolachi in his own area and thrown the dead body in their area, so that the other group would get blamed for her murder. Consequently, each group began to lay the blame at the door of the other.

One person said, 'You have disfigured the face of Kolachi'.

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## *My Karachi, My Story in My Words*

KULSOOM KHALIL

This morning, once again, my children refused to go to school. 'Mummy, you know that we have not been able to sleep the whole night. We were frightened by the sound of the crackers.'

I became worried on seeing them so restless and unable to go to school owing to the unrest in the city. The children took my silence as acquiescence and came to sit with me. 'Mummy, why do the pigeons who used to come to our window, and to whom we fed grain, not come any more? It seems as if they have made friends with someone else. And the cat has not been coming to our home. Why?'

'My dear children, pigeons leave a place that is filled with oppression, and so do the blessings of God.' I always feared the questions to which I had no answers.

'Mummy, tell them to stop now. We have had enough; otherwise we will not go to school tomorrow.'

'My children, nobody will care if you do not go to school. When millions of children already do not go, your not going to school will not make any difference.'

'Mummy, our teacher says he who kills one person kills all human beings. These are the words of God. Don't these people fear God? Is there nobody to call them into account and punish them?' I don't know why incidents make children wise before their time. They begin to ask questions wiser than their age, and we have no answers to such questions.

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When guards turn into robbers, stoves become cold, one is worried about his daily bread, there is no water, electricity, or gas, mothers forget lullabies, and the children sing lullabies to themselves to go to sleep. I didn't know when the children had gone to sleep. I looked at their innocent faces and felt boundless feelings of love for them. I could not help but kiss their faces and move my fingers through their hair. Children are innocent angels and the flowers of a family's garden; only books look good in their hands. I was engrossed in these thoughts when I heard a sound of intense firing and a pathetic voice echoed in my ears. 'Oh my son. . . !'

I said to myself, in my heart, 'May everything be alright!' I mustered up courage and opened the window a little. There was a moving scene before my eyes. The vegetables from a hawker's cart were scattered all over the road, and he himself was lying on his face on one side, the blood flowing out of his body and colouring the road red. Another innocent victim lay near him; his white shirt by now reddened with blood. The kohl in his eyes had spread, which his mother must have had applied to his eyes with great love. His satchel lay nearby.

I could not help but scream at this scene, and put my hands over my eyes because I did not have the courage to look any more. The children awoke from their sleep in confusion and, upon seeing me weeping bitterly, asked me, 'Mummy, do you also fear the firecrackers?' But, I had no answer to their question—except my tears.



## *Mr Karachi*

TAHIRA PERVEEN JAFRI

In those days, preparations for the 'Mr Karachi' contest were in full swing in the club. My only desire was to win the bodybuilding contest and win the title of 'Mr Karachi'. My coach had invested a lot of effort in me, and he was sure that I would win the title. It required hard work and a lot of time.

That day, when I came out of the club, it was already dark. I quickened my steps, walking towards the bus stop. The club was situated at Water Pump, and my house was in Gulshan-e-Iqbal. I saw a wagon for Gulshan-e-Iqbal coming in my direction. As I was about to step into the van, indiscriminate firing suddenly began. I could not make out what was going on. People began to run here and there. And, I felt as if someone had inserted a hot iron bar into my body. I fell to the ground. I wanted to get up and run away, but I could not stand up. I collapsed over there and began to cry for help.

Meanwhile, ambulances began to arrive at the scene, sounding their sirens. Upon hearing my cry, a volunteer put me into an ambulance. My body was shaking and rolling in the fast-moving ambulance. My head struck the iron bar of the ambulance several times, but its fast speed got me to a hospital in a few minutes. There was wild commotion in the emergency ward. The wounded were being brought to the hospital and taken inside on stretchers. I was conscious by now. I gave the attendants my phone number. Leaders of political parties and volunteers had reached the hospital to enquire after the wounded.

I had lost a lot of blood. Blood was arranged for me, so that there might be a chance for me to live. The bullet had pierced through my body in such a way that my intestines and several veins had been damaged. There was little chance for my survival after a long surgery, but the prayers of my parents and brothers and sisters infused new life into my body. However, a certain artery that takes blood to the feet could not be rejoined, and my foot became paralyzed for always. It became difficult for me to stand on my foot. My family had to take care of me, as though I were a child. It was a trying period. I had to learn how to stand all over again.

When an eighteen-year-old man becomes helpless and bedridden, it becomes so painful that it cannot be described in words. My dreams had been shattered. The one who could lift a weight twice his own weight could not carry his own weight now. But I did not lose heart. After physiotherapy and treatment for over a year, the doctor got a special pair of shoes made for me which helped me balance my body. Then, the most important thing in my life was to complete my education, so that I would not be a burden to anybody. I succeeded in getting a good job after completing my education—having got an engineering degree. Now, I exercise regularly to look smart and active. However, it is necessary to keep my weight under control, so that my weak foot is not burdened by additional weight. The club still holds bodybuilding contests, but I don't think about them. The daily bloodshed, because of firing or bomb blasts, reopens my own wounds. He who will succeed in delivering my city from the ruthlessness of these beasts, and will take account of the oppression of the innocent people, deserves to be crowned 'Mr Karachi'.

## *Fate*

MOONA SYED

This, a big city, is what big cities are usually like. The common features of all big cities are the people who speak different languages, the crowds of people on footpaths, the throng of traffic on the roads, the honking of horns, and so on. Everyone cares about what they have to say. Nobody is concerned about what others say. The atmosphere is so polluted that one cannot see anything.

‘Please wake up, my Chanda, Oh Feekay! Hurry up, my son. Don’t you know that if we do not work, we will have nothing to eat?’

‘But, Mother!’ Feeka woke up and looked at the stale *paapa* in his hand, which had been given to him by his mother who had brought it from a heap of garbage; the black water, called tea, did not contain milk. ‘But, Mother! I am very hungry. This will not satisfy me.’

The hand striking the back of his head was very heavy. ‘Oh, Feekay! Oh, you lazy and good-for-nothing boy! Get up at once!’ Without looking at the hand, he knew whose hand it was. It was regular behaviour for his father. ‘You do this daily. It is for this reason that we earn so little money. If you don’t work, how will you eat? You good-for-nothing!’

Another slap brought a flood of tears to the eyes of seven-year-old Feeka. He had to work like everyone else in his family. His mother picked items from garbage heaps, casting away things that she could not use or sell, and added to the number of

children every year. All the boys worked together and bore the burden of the increasing number of family members. They also bore the expenses of their drug-addict father.

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In this unprecedented city, where all sorts of jobs are available, there was a man who was the administrator of an orphanage. A short man, his beard was dyed with henna. He wore a large scarf on his shoulders. You can call him by any name. However, he demanded that the children address him as Haji Sahib.

'You needn't worry. The children will arrive in time. You know what wages we get for our services. Yes, yes, the children will be quite neat and clean.' He got off the phone and called out, 'Fazloo, Oh Fazloo! Where are you now?' The voice, dipped in sweetness some moments ago, had now changed into a harsh tone. The hand, quickly stroking the beard, reflected his anxiety. Fazloo presented himself at once. 'Are the children ready?' Haji Sahib asked in a harsh tone.

'Yes, Haji Sahib!'

'Have a look at them once again. They must be neat and clean. It is a big party that they are to go to today. And, yes, bring that boy. What is his name? Oh yes, Abdul Qadir. Do bring him along. He has a sweet voice.'

In a posh area of this city, victim to indifference, there was a recital of the Quran at the *soyam* of someone's mother. As has become the custom, children are called from orphanages to recite the Quran and the *Fatiha*. In return, the poor orphans receive a cauldron of *biryani*—so that the rich family can earn a reward from God. The dead receive the reward for the recitation of the Quran. The family, in return, fulfil their obligation to fulfil their responsibility, without any effort, and earn a reward as well. And, the providers of the children—the administrators—earn a reasonable profit.



'Allah is happy and His men are happy! And Haji Sahib as well!' Haji Sahib's hand continuously stroked his beard and his lips wore a sweet smile.

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Although there are wide roads and many flyovers and underpasses in the city, yet traffic jams are a common feature. While the general public becomes miserable, Feeka—and other people like him—earn a living as a result of these traffic jams. Several children, like Feeka, stand under the burning sun, without shade and barefooted on the hot asphalt, and carry buckets of dirty water in one hand and small wipers in the other. No sooner does a car stop, they sprinkle water on its windscreen and begin to clean it. Some kind people hand over some coins to them, some scold them, and some, after having their windscreen cleaned, pretend that they are about to pay but drive away without doing so. Perhaps, they enjoy watching the barefooted boys running after them for a few rupees.

A van stopped in the traffic jam. Feeka ran over at once and, putting water on the windscreen, began to clean it. But, a strange thing happened: instead of getting some money, Feeka received a slap from the driver who came out of the van to do so.

'Be off from here! You bastard and rascal! Where did you come from?'

Feeka stared, with eyes full of tears and a reddened cheek. Disgrace was his daily fate, but today he had got more than that. In the morning, he had got it from his father's hand and now from another person. Instead of getting tea and *paapa*, he was empty-stomached and getting slaps. In the morning, the tea had fallen from his hands, and now. . . . Hunger buried its claws into his belly. All the children witnessed this scene. Abdul Qadir was among them.

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As usual, the gathering at the *milad*, and the recital of the Quran, had been magnificent. Abdul Qadir's melodious voice created an enthralling atmosphere. The bereaved family received words of appreciation from all the guests who had come to participate in the ritual. What a wonderful *soyam* for the mother! All the orphans had their fill of *biryani*, and were given gifts. Fazloo also received a favour. The most important gift, however, was lavished upon Abdul Qadir because it was he who had enraptured all.

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On their return journey, the van stopped at the same traffic lights. Feeka ran towards it to earn his livelihood but, upon seeing the driver, he was reminded of the slap he had received from his hand. This time, Abdul Qadir had got a seat near the window. He felt disgusted on seeing Feeka—with his tanned skin, hair made colourless by the heat of the sun, and scrawny body. Feeka had been starving since the morning. There was a traffic jam as usual, but there was nothing in it for him. His eyes welled up with tears of helplessness. Upon seeing the tears in his eyes, Abdul Qadir's heart was awakened by feelings of sympathy, instead of disgust, for the first time.

'Why are you weeping?' Feeka's ears heard the voice of a boy who was almost his age. Hunger further sharpened its claws. His intestines twisted. He felt an intense contortion gripping his innards.

Abdul Qadir became uneasy, seeing the boy's eyes filled with tears. 'Tell me why are you weeping.'

'I have not earned even a single rupee since morning.'

'So what?' Abdul Qadir's eyes were wide open with curiosity.

'When I go home empty-handed, my father will beat me, and. . . .' He moistened his dry lips by passing his tongue over them. 'Today I have had nothing to eat since morning.'

‘Then, why do you not go to your house and eat something?’ Abdul Qadir, with a belly full of *biryani*, bestowed this advice upon Feeka. ‘Why are you hungry?’

Feeka cast a wrathful look at him.

‘Because my parents are alive! I am not an orphan!’

## *These Extinguished Lamps*

UZMA IFTIKHAR

Sheraz had been her fiancé. He was a great athlete. He wanted to become the fastest person in the world, but he was murdered two years ago in an incident of mobile-snatching. Since then, life for Rida had stood still. She surrounded herself with machines, because machines did not cause pain or grief. She thought that machines were better than human beings. Now, each of her mornings began with a greeting message received through her mobile phone, and her evenings ended with her updating her status on Facebook. Her whole group at university was like that—a crowd of carefree people who had no social or economic anxieties.

It was Sunday but, even after getting up at 11 a.m., her morning was as tumultuous as it was when she used to go to university. Her family consisted of her mother and herself. 'She will be gardening,' Rida thought to herself when she found that her mother was not in her room. She fixed a hairclip in her dishevelled hair, took out a packet of frozen food, prepared a burger in the twinkling of an eye, took out a can of Sprite, came into the lounge, and started eating the burger in big bites. Her eyes were fixed on a 32" LCD TV. Her mother came in and exclaimed, 'What is this? You are stuffing yourself with fast food again. Rida, come with me to an art gallery today. There is a nice photography exhibition titled "Hamara Karachi Hamari Nazar Mein". So, get up!' Her mother's tone was such that Rida had to get up.



‘Wow,’ she said, spontaneously, when they reached the art gallery. The beautiful walls were adorned with eye-catching photographs of the city of Karachi. One picture kept her engrossed for a long while. It was a picture of an apartment building. Not only was there the darkness of the night, but also the darkness gifted by KESC. There was no light around the building. But, there were some earthen lamps placed in a line on the balcony of a flat; an onlooker felt as if all the stars in the black sky had left their orbits and were standing in a queue, with their hands together, as though honouring the earth. The caption under the picture was ‘*Aas* (Hope) by Saahir Ahmad’.

‘It seems as if my photography has impressed you a lot,’ someone standing behind her said. She turned around and saw that he was a familiar stranger from her Physics lab. “I apologise for intruding on your solitude once again.” His style was still characterized by politeness.

‘You are a jack of all trades,’ Rida managed to say.

‘No, I am just on a journey, without looking for a destination. My path is my destination.’ His tone was so impressive that Rida was absorbed by his words.

‘Rida, have you met Saahir? He is very talented. He is a good photographer as well as a sculptor. I met him at Sea View for the first time. He was creating beautiful sand sculptures of famous Pakistani buildings on the seashore: Minar-e-Pakistan, Habib Bank Plaza, Mazar-e-Quaid. Every masterpiece of his reflected his love for his country. People gathered around him, abandoning their activities, to watch him. Then, I came to understand how enlightenment comes from art. And, Rida, each of his statues and sculptures reflects a couplet of Ghalib, Iqbal, or Faiz. People read these couplets and learn them by heart. He provides them with images that embody the message of these poets. When you go to Saddar Bazaar, do visit Saahir’s shop. It is still a small shop but, I believe, one day he will be the owner

of a big studio.' Her mother was full of praise for him, while he stood there shyly.

Rida was thinking that he was like her, but his thoughts and his style were so much more imaginative. 'Well, if you make my statue, which couplet would I embody?' Rida teased him a little. Immediately, he recited a poem in response. Rida's silvery laughter echoed through the gallery. She had, indeed, been inspired by him. It had been a beautiful evening.

Monday was a hot day. That day, Rida's class was at 9 a.m. She remained busy with Facebook for a while. Then, she went to the table for breakfast. Her mother was holding the newspaper in a state of shock.

'Mummy, what happened?' She shook her mother's shoulder. The headline was about a bomb blast in Saddar Bazaar. 'Mummy, news like this is common these days,' Rida said with a dejected heart and put the newspaper aside.

'But, the curator of the art gallery just called and told me that Saahir Ahmad has been killed in the bomb blast!' The tears in her mother's eyes started flowing, and Rida was in a state of shock. She stood up and fled to her room. Leaning against the closed door, her eyes filled with tears. She pictured Saahir, with his bright eyes, and there was Sheraz's face in the background. It seemed to her as if he had died just yesterday. . . . Several moments passed thus. Then, she wiped her tears angrily and went towards her social website. Everything was as usual. The same typed words, the same uploaded pictures, the same YouTube, the same frenzy and jokes! For some moments, she stared at the screen with an empty mind before she updated her status and her fingers ran across the keyboard.



## *Positive Action*

BABRIK KARMAL JAMALI

Our Karachi is known for two things: the sea of salty water and the sea of human beings. In both of these seas, merchants of death wander everywhere all the time. These merchants of death become the cause of death for hundreds of people, sometimes in the form of suicide bombers, sometimes in the form of target killers, and sometimes in the form of accidents.

One night, her motherly love was uneasy on that peaceful and cool evening. She glanced at her dear children. Her anguish was enhanced further seeing them writhe in hunger, filling her face with a grief which burned her whole being like a fire. She was absorbed in her thoughts—she had never thought that time would commit such a cruel act and would cause her home to be submerged in sorrow and grief.

Her husband was a rickshaw driver. Her whole family lived on whatever he earned. Life was going smoothly. If there were no joys in her home, there were no sorrows either. But, suddenly, the situation became so bad that everything was shattered; a turn of events robbed them of everything. Her husband had died as a result of being hit by a stray bullet. Her 'garden' turned into a desert. He, who had searched for every joy for his children, left them because of a bullet. Now, there was a heap of grief in her home. She felt as if she was living in hell. The livelihood that had made it possible to eat bread twice a day had been snatched from them.

For some days after the death of her husband, meals were provided to them by their neighbours in the *mohallah*. This continued for a week, and then it ceased. Also, their relatives did not consider helping her. She was not educated, and one of her arms was weak. She could not do any labour work. She could not think of begging at people's doors. She went out of her house in the evening, but she could not even purchase poison. She wanted to take poison and also feed it to her children. When she came back, after looking for work, she heard her youngest son call her, 'Ammi, I am feeling very hungry. Please give me something to eat.'

The voice of her child forced her to think. In this state of helplessness, her eyes filled with tears. The voice of her crying infant made her even more sorrowful. She felt so helpless that she fell ill with fever, as did both of her children. At that time, the older son called to her, 'Ammi, I have been weeping since yesterday. I am terribly hungry.' The mother continued thinking, for a long time, but could not find any solution. She kept awake the whole night, lost in troubling thoughts.

In the morning, the elder son said to his mother, 'Mummy, if my younger brother dies like our father, our neighbours will provide us with food for a week. You and I will survive for some more days.' The mother began to weep, despairing at her son's thought. Just then, the headmistress of the local girls' primary school entered her house and looked closely at the children and their mother. Then she said to her, 'Zainab, you have not come out of the house for so many days. What is the matter?'

Zainab burst into tears and told the whole story to the headmistress. The headmistress began to weep upon hearing Zainab's words. She, at once, gave her five hundred rupees and said, 'Hurry up and go to buy food for yourself and your children, otherwise they will die of hunger. From tomorrow, I shall find some job for you at the school.' Zainab took the money, embraced the headmistress, and soon went out to get



food. She returned with the food and first fed both her children; then, she had her meal. The headmistress watched her very keenly. All of them were busy satisfying their hunger. Then, the headmistress went away and asked Zainab to go to the school the next morning. The children and mother were very happy because of the money given by the headmistress. They ate food in the morning as well. After breakfast, the mother went to the school along with her children. The headmistress had Zainab employed as a peon at the school, and had her children admitted to the school free of charge. In a few days, the situation at her house was set right. Finding herself happy in the sea of the human beings, she began to pray for the headmistress and said, 'This is our Karachi!'

## *Terror and the Terrified*

JASIM KHWAJA

I came out of the office to have lunch; rather, it was as if I had been released on parole. Going for lunch was the only legal pretext for us employees to be able to leave the office. But, the condition was that we had to return to our desks by a certain time. I was glancing at various carts, thinking about what to eat, when I caught sight of my favourite dish: potato kebabs. I, at once, ordered two kebabs and sat down on a bench. I looked at my watch; there were still another fifty minutes between my freedom and the 'barrack'. I began to read a newspaper lying on the bench. The headline was smeared in Karachi's blood. Extremists had shifted from their localities and spilled out, with their fights and bloodletting, all over the city. It was for this reason that they had divided into various groups that were fighting against one another to gain the control of the city. They seemed to think that when they did such things, they could instil terror into the hearts of the people of their areas. In a way, this seems to be right because these terrorist elements keep the residents of their areas hostage because of their power. They criminally extort money from them, and spend their energy in murdering and kidnapping.

An elderly person sitting beside me said to me, 'Son, are you an employee of this company?' He pointed towards my office with his hand. He had seen the advertisement, fixed outside the office, which said that the company was in need of a worker. He had followed me as I had come out of the office. 'Son, I wish to get a job in this company. Will you help me in this regard?'

The person looked to be around fifty years old and needy, but our company needed a young man. However, the person was speaking so humbly that I did not have the heart to refuse him. 'Look, uncle, the big boss interviews people for jobs. *Insha' Allah*, you will get the job,' I said in order to comfort him.

'*Insha' Allah! Insha' Allah!* May God keep you safe!' he patted my shoulder with affection. Meanwhile, the kebabs had arrived and we ate together.

I asked him, 'Saleem Sahib! Since when have the conditions of Karachi been so bad? I have only seen thieves, robbers, and hooligans around for as long as I can remember.'

At this, the elderly man looked towards me with reddened eyes. I became a bit afraid. Water began to flow from his red eyes; when his eyelashes had been drenched with the wine of tears, the goblet spilled over. He heaved a deep sigh and said, 'No, my son! It was not so. No one knows who has cast an evil eye on the city. This city had a distinguished place in the whole country. Its splendour and bazaars were no less than those of any other city. Please say a good word about me to your boss. I am in the dire need of job.'

'Son, do say a good word about him. He seems to be very distressed and needy,' said the vendor, who had been listening to our conversation. I nodded my head.

No sooner did we stand up from the bench than two or three persons ran past us, and we could hear the sound of things falling and breaking. Suddenly, we heard the crack of bullets and, the very next moment, three motorcycles stopped almost in front of us. The motorcyclists had modern weapons in their hands, and they began to fire at the people present there. We all began to run. I ran towards the office. Saleem Sahib also ran behind me. I had covered the distance of a few steps when I felt that I was not being followed by Saleem Sahib. I turned around only to



see that he was lying on the ground, and that he had been hit in his head by a bullet.

While I was still looking at him, I collided with another person who had fallen to the ground and I fell down. I fell down so hard that darkness prevailed before my eyes. I thought I had also been hit by a bullet. I was not able to decipher anything in this state of confusion. There was screaming all around. People were running here and there in order to save their lives. A person to my right was firing his weapon indiscriminately. He fired at whoever he caught sight of. On my left, the body of a child was lying on the ground. Perhaps, he was going home after school. A stream of blood ran, from his abdomen, towards me. Another boy, who was perhaps his friend or brother, had been wounded and was crying, 'Mummy! Mummy!' Countless people lay near my office building, some writhing in pain and some lying still. Many were wounded and were crying.

The killing had stopped now, and the murderers had departed on their motorcycles after completing their task without any hesitation. There was no trace of the police. There was blood everywhere. Small streams of blood flowed towards a point in a pattern of different angles. I looked at Saleem Sahib once again. His eyes were cast towards me and still seemed to be making a request for a job. One of his hands was on his chest, which had also been pierced by a bullet. His eyes had dried. He had cried all his tears and there were no more tears left in his body. It was just a few minutes earlier that Saleem Sahib was narrating his past and requesting a job, and I had comforted him. He had looked calm and happy at my comforting him. His story had ended, but the story had not yet ended. All the stories of the city of Karachi were now the stories of terror and of terrified people.



## *For the Sake of Work*

TAHIR ANWAR BHATTI

I reported to my office on my arrival in Karachi. I was given a briefing about my duties. The last sentence of the briefing was very important, which was: 'The situation in Karachi is very grave, therefore, you cannot leave your camp without any reason and without informing us.'

This single sentence shattered all my dreams. Every person here had a strange story to tell. Every story was different from the stories told by my grandmother and my mother. Here, there was despair; quiet, pin drop silence; and dead bodies found in sacks everywhere. Darkness ruled in the City of Lights! Oh my God! What was happening?

One evening, as the shadows of the evening were settling in, I was present at the assigned spot for my duty. We were informed that three of our camp colleagues, who had gone out for some task, had not yet returned. The camp administration was very worried. The police had been informed. The night passed but there was no trace of our companions. The next morning, the police was informed that a Suzuki pick-up van, found in an area of the city, had three dead bodies in it. The police took custody of the bodies. After checking, it was revealed that these were our colleagues' bodies. Our hearts bled. We performed their funeral rites, and then a prayer for forgiveness of their sins was offered. I kept awake the whole night and wondered why they had been killed. Five years passed in this conflict, but I could not find an answer.

The period of my employment in Karachi was completed, and I returned to Islamabad. My employment continued in Islamabad. In 2007, I got engaged to one of my colleagues. Some of our colleagues thought ill of this. I remained busy with arrangements for my wedding, but the intrigues to make my marriage a failure also continued. I got married on 20 June 2007. After the wedding, my wife and I went to our office happily. We thought that our colleagues would congratulate us, that there would be an atmosphere of joy, and that we would give them a treat. But that was not so. Both of us were called into the office. Firstly, we were congratulated. Then, we were given a closed envelope. Both of us were very happy, thinking it was our wedding gift because no one had given us anything as yet.

Happily, we opened our envelopes. Darkness prevailed before our eyes. I felt giddy. In my envelope were orders for my transfer to the extremely problematic city of Shorkot in southern Punjab. What was happening? For a moment, I forgot that I was a married person. My wife comforted me saying, 'Don't worry. I am with you.' I looked at her with pain-filled eyes and then, controlling myself, asked her what was in her envelope. She said, 'I don't know. But I am your wife. Obviously, we have to go together.' After saying this, she opened her envelope and began to weep, putting her head on my shoulder.

I comforted her and asked, 'What has happened?'

She answered, in an anguished voice, 'It's Karachi! I will quit my job. Why should I go to Karachi? I will live with you. No one can separate us. We will not go hungry. We will live on limited resources. We would not go anywhere else.'

I controlled myself and said to her, 'Don't worry! Karachi is not a bad place to live in.' She said, 'Karachi has snatched me, your wife, from you. Karachi is a punishment for me!'

I left my wife in Karachi and, after comforting her, left for Shorkot. Sometimes, I was able to get a leave for two or four days. Two days were spent in the journey to Karachi. One day was spent in listening to my wife and making her listen to me, and two days were spent on the return journey. May God save even an enemy from such a painful life!

I was informed that my mother had died in Rawalpindi. I hurried back from Karachi. When I reached Rawalpindi, she had already gone into the dark cell of her grave. People had covered the grave with mud. I sat at the head of the grave and wept bitterly. It occurred to me that Karachi had snatched my mother from me. After fulfilling my responsibilities for my mother, I left for Karachi once again. When I reached Karachi, with a heavy heart and a heavy step, I felt as if Karachi was also weeping for my mother. After finding Karachi sorrowful and mournful for the first time, I was obliged to think once again about who was to blame.

When I sat with my wife, she said to me, 'Help me get out of Karachi before the time comes when you cannot attend my funeral, just as you could not attend your mother's funeral.' I was finding it very hard to look at her face. She looked like a psychiatric patient. I asked her what we should do. She said, 'I shall resign from the job, and we shall go to some place far away.'

I said, 'Karachi is also very far.'

She said, 'We did not come here on our own.' I accepted my wife's plan. My wife resigned from the office and, on 24 April 2011, we abandoned Karachi once and for all and came to live in Rawalpindi.

## *My Karachi Too*

TASNEEM SHARIF

My frail heart was beating very fast. I had seen a homemade bomb in the hand of a person in an enraged crowd. Before he removed the pin of the bomb, the familiar smell of tear gas spread in the atmosphere. People scattered, running here and there. Some people had covered their mouths and noses with wet handkerchiefs. I also looked for water but the mist, and the firing by the police, had cast a thick layer of smoke. I was unable to understand anything. I began to run in one direction, without thinking, and hid behind a car. I was having great difficulty in breathing. My nostrils and eyes were aching.

The riot had filled the atmosphere with terror and horror. People had confined themselves to their homes. The echo of the sound of bullets, smell of gunpowder, riots, strikes, violence, burning of things, anarchy, lawlessness, terror, and panic had become part of life in Karachi. My birthplace was Karachi and, for as long as I could remember, I have been watching all this. I should have become accustomed to this in three or four years, but that was not so. These horrible sounds terrified me even now. I peeped through the windscreen of the car. Security workers were holding their positions everywhere. The rioters were no longer there. Stones were scattered everywhere on the roads, and the smell of burning tyres still filled the air. I remained crouched there, silent.

Sometimes, I wished to abandon everything and go and live in the wilderness. Yes, there was the danger of wild beasts in the wilderness but here, in this city, I found no humanity left in the people. Sympathy, love, sincerity, loyalty, faithfulness, honesty,



and all such positive traits had long disappeared from this city. The City of Lights had turned into the terrible darkness of a grave.

'*Puch! Puch!*' A familiar voice broke the sequence of my thoughts. I, at once, turned around. My little friend had brought milk for me. His innocent smile assured me that graciousness, kindness to the poor, and humanity had not disappeared completely. I stuck up my tail and, saying *mew mew*, I ran towards him.

## *Catching Glimpses*

ZAINAB SHAMIM POTRIK

The bright sun of the summer season, a crowd of vehicles, shops in a row, and people burning in the heat on both sides—living in Karachi, I had become deeply familiar with this scene. My rickshaw was travelling along University Road at a reasonable speed. It took me to Gulshan Chowrangi where I got off and waited for a bus. Several buses, rickshaws, and taxis passed by. I got onto the desired bus. The buses of Karachi are very interesting. I have been collecting the sayings and poems written on the backs of rickshaws, taxis, trucks, and buses. For example:

1. In the morning at one place and in the evening at another place. Long live Shah Noorani!
2. I will become a truck when I grow up. Kaaloo Rickshaw.
3. Prayer of a mother: breeze from Paradise; prayer of father: air from a fan.
4. I have tried luck, now I am trying fate. I am driving a rickshaw for a certain unfaithful's sake.
5. He who torments his mother will drive a rickshaw. Bashir Baba.

There are several other masterpieces besides these. Multicoloured glass, like beautiful eyes, adorn the backs of the buses, tassels hang inside and outside; the charming songs played by the drivers add to the elegance.

Then, there are the snacks at bus stops: the carts of *golay ganday* and sugarcane juice everywhere at bus stops. Boiled sweet potato,

sweet and sour tamarind, various kinds of salads, the sweet *sattu* drink, etc. are also sold. And, there are newspaper and magazine sellers there. Many people sell various kinds of items in the bus as well.

After I got off the bus, I walked on foot along Rashid Minhas Road. This road is an important highway. There are many well-known, as well as anonymous, restaurants, such as Mela, Lasania, Mr Burger, Pizza Hut, Subway, etc. on this road. The bridge after Jauhar Chowrangi was clearly visible. Small and large vehicles and motorcycles travelled on the road. There were shops with fancy lights in front of me. There were several large showrooms, like Singer, Honda, and Dawlance, visible in front of Askari. There was a branch of Silk Bank nearby. Karachi has changed a lot in a short period, but these changes are certainly positive.

Upon hearing the *azaan*, I entered a restaurant. After having tea, I returned to the road. There was a juggler standing outside. He reminded me of my childhood. I was brought back to the present by the sound of a *dugdugi*.

When I look around, I feel as if Karachi has progressed despite all the violence and trouble. Every kind of building, mansion, and five-star hotel has been constructed here. Just before the United Bakery, something hit my head with a *thak*. When I came to my senses, I discovered it was a cricket ball.

## *In My Mother's Shade*

IRUM IQBAL

I was jobless. The suffocated life of the village horrified me. There was silence on the lips of all. The green fields of grain sang of the prosperity of the landlords and the misery of the workers. One night, I focused my eyes on the revolution of the moon and stars and said to myself, 'Why should I not search for job in Karachi, like Shabbir?' This thought terrified me, yet I set out on my journey to wander here and there on the roads of Karachi in search of a job.

The changing colours of the world outside the Cantonment train station were vibrant, like the colours of a rainbow. I put one of my hands tightly on my bag and the other hand on my pocket during the whole journey—from coming off the train to sitting on the bus, and from the bus to Chakiwara—so that I might not become poorer, or even a pauper, after having my pocket picked.

When I met Shabbir, he said, 'Wow! The ant has grown its wings. You have come to Karachi, but where will you stay?'

I replied, 'At whatever place you suggest. I am a young person. I have come to make a living here. I need your guidance in this regard.' Then, Shabbir Khan frowned a little and showed me to the house of Zaman Khan. Having experienced Shabbir's cold shoulder, I was reminded of my mother's words that when someone begins to live in a city, his blood becomes water, i.e. he becomes apathetic. Although he was not of my kin, yet he was my fellow villager, and villagers' relations are known to be stronger, with one another, than blood relations.



## IN MY MOTHER'S SHADE

Anyway, I earned a lot by doing various kinds of jobs: driving a rickshaw, serving tables at hotels, getting tips, baking bread at a *tandoor*, filling petrol at petrol pumps, working as a shop assistant, labourer, chauffeur, etc. I found Karachi to be like a mother who wants to take all of her children in her embrace.

My expenses were very meagre because Zaman Khan had granted fifteen or sixteen people the comfort of a luxury hotel by putting up charpoys with curtains in the big courtyard of his house. But, since there was just one bathroom there, it was a battleground in the morning. Ramazan Khan prevented this battle from erupting by becoming a referee and giving each of us a time of five minutes. '*Khochha!* Five minutes have passed. Come out, otherwise I will pull you out in your present state.' I used to get up early in the mornings to save myself from this fuss. By the time the battle scene was beginning, I would be enjoying tea and *paratha* at Soorat Khan's hotel and waiting to see who had won. We were required to pay 500 rupees per month in exchange for a residence, including electricity and gas costs, etc. Our residence was shared by bedbugs but, when we threw ourselves upon our charpoys, exhausted by the day's labour, we fell asleep in no time despite the bedbugs.

I had very little money at the beginning. Shabbir had rightly said that Karachi was very expensive. It is very expensive to live here with a family. It is as expensive as it must be in London. But, I made my fortune in this city. I continued to learn by keeping my mind and senses open. Now, I have my own shop at Bolton Market. I have my own house in Karachi. I married my fiancée from my village and brought her and my mother to Karachi with me.

## *My Karachi through My Eyes*

SHAHIDA PERVEEN

Like all children, the journey by train was very pleasant and enjoyable for Shahla. She was stuck to the window for a long time, staring at the sights passing by, and when night fell and she saw that she could see nothing but her face reflected in the window she diverted her attention towards the people climbing up to, and down from, the berths and the food they were eating. A lot of time was spent thus, from Khairpur to Karachi, on that journey with her family in the late 1950s when they went to stay with their uncle in Karachi.

They had still another hour and a half's worth of journey left, before they would arrive at Karachi, when the signboards of big factories and mills could to be seen. Shahla had seen such pictures in newspapers and magazines. She shouted with joy, 'Mummy, we have arrived at Karachi!'

'No, my dear, we have only reached Pipri', her mother said while reading the sign for 'Pipri Station'. The train passed Landhi, Malir, Drigh Road, and at last stopped gracefully at the splendid railway station of Karachi Cantt. Her uncle had come there to receive them. The luggage was put in a taxi by a *coolie*.

Shahla saw such wide roads for the first time. Cars, buses, rickshaws, and taxis were moving along the wide roads. There was no throng of people in those days, like there is today. People were sitting inside the buses, not on their roofs. When Shahla saw a red double-decker bus, she became very excited.

After a short while, they reached home. Her uncle had arranged for a quarter in front of Ayesha Badani in Abyssinia Lines. There were two rows of neat and clean quarters. Almost all the residents of the quarters had grown hedges of fragrant flowers, which made the whole atmosphere fragrant. The neighbours had prepared a meal for the guests. All the people gathered together at mealtime. The meal was served on a sheet spread on the floor in the middle of the drawing room. The meal was very delicious and elaborate.

Suddenly, her uncle said, 'Today, the American president and his wife are about to arrive in Karachi. Since we have had our meal, why not go to Drigh Road to catch a glimpse of them?'

Shahla stood up at once, joyfully, 'The president of the USA and his wife are very beautiful'.

'You are right. They are very beautiful,' her uncle said.

All of them left for Drigh Road on foot. People were standing alert on both sides of the road. They had not been bussed in from a village or a school. They had come to receive the guests of their own accord and were standing there with strict discipline. The traffic was blocked for a few moments. All the people had their eyes fixed on the road coming from the airport. There was such pin-drop silence that Shahla could even hear her own heartbeat. The roar of a motorcycle broke the silence. Then, another motorcycle came. Then, a third motorcycle! Then, a car followed by an open jeep which was being driven very slowly. President Kennedy and Mrs Jacqueline Kennedy were standing in the jeep and responding to the welcoming slogans of the people by waving their hands. Shahla had cut out pictures of Mrs Jacqueline Kennedy from newspapers. When she saw her very close-up, she felt as if she was smiling at her. This magical scene lasted for fifteen or twenty minutes. Then, the traffic became normal and all the people returned to their homes.

## *Old Colours*

MONEIZA NOORULAIN SIDDIQUI

The fast-moving and smoke-emitting traffic was at its peak. The traffic was disorderly and endless. My husband was driving under extreme stress. I was wondering how we would be able to pull our car out of the swarm of uncontrolled traffic. I was still absorbed in these thoughts when the sound of *phat phat* collided with our ears, and a rickshaw emerged from amidst the big vehicles victoriously. It seemed as if a mouse was searching for its way amidst elephants. Then, it vanished from my sight. I smiled in amusement. I thought, in my heart, that it was the only vehicle that could take a person to his destination in the twinkling of an eye. The rest of us were stuck in traffic.

Rickshaws deserve a reward. They are the grandeur and identity of the roads of Karachi. My husband is disgusted by rickshaws. He often quarrels with rickshaw drivers. However, at that moment, I was singing eulogies for rickshaws in my heart. Our car was advancing at the pace of a snail. I lost myself in a journey to the world of the past. When I was living with my parents in Dubai, fifteen or twenty years ago, I missed Pakistan, especially Karachi, a lot. We used to visit Pakistan during the summer vacations. I used to move around Karachi to my heart's content. I travelled on buses, trains, and rickshaws. I loved every sound of Karachi—from the cawing of the crows to the noise of the traffic, time flew and I was obliged to leave Karachi.

While I was absorbed in these thoughts, I was startled by the sound of a horn. When I turned my eyes towards the source of the sound, I saw a truck next to our car and it seemed as if it



was growling at us. After great difficulty, the traffic started to move along smoothly. The cool breeze succeeded in decreasing the flush on my husband's face. I was lost in the vales of sleep for a while. But, I then awakened to the sound of a horn. When I looked out, I found the road somewhat wider. The speed of our car was also fast. After covering a short distance, we reached near Jail Road Chowrangi. Once again, I was engulfed by my thoughts. Windows of the past were, once again, opened.

How wide the Chowrangi is now! Now, it is a Chowrangi only in name. It used to be a wide and lush green roundabout, and a gardener was appointed to take care of the greenery. We, children, called it a *chaman* (garden). Our residence was in Hyderabad Colony. My uncle often brought me to the *chaman* for a stroll. It is for this reason that I began to call him Chaman Uncle, and continue to call him by that name. He does not mind at all. These roads around me are very familiar. My school was near Guru Mandir. The name of the school was Greenwood School, but there is no trace of it now. Whenever I pass this place, I try to search for its signs.

I still go to Hyderabad Colony with my husband and children, under the pretext of buying pickles and sauces. I try to search for my childhood here. Our grandmother lived here. We committed many mischievous acts. I show this place to my children again and again and say to them, 'Look, these are the places where we used to live, but now new things have been built in place of the old things.' The memories attached to the past are becoming dim, but I scratch through the new colours with my eyes and succeed in finding the old colours.

## *City of Lights*

AFREEN FAIZA

A few moments before sunset, streetlights on both sides of the road lit up. Two stray dogs ran after each other and collided with a young man. Then they separated from each other quickly and ran away at full speed. The boy suddenly got closer to the girl walking beside him. He whispered something into her ear. Both smiled meaningfully and continued to walk together, ignorant of the world. Some feeling of amusement was expressed, and then they began to laugh uncontrollably. They sat down on a nearby bench which was in comparatively less light. The security guard approached them. The boy made a joke on seeing him. The girl appreciated his joke with her eyes, and the security guard smiled. The boy, understanding the delicacy of the situation, discreetly handed over two banknotes to the guard. The guard smiled again and went to sit on a bench nearby. Meanwhile, the shift of the army guards at the mausoleum changed, and the thunder of boots could be heard. Before the darkness of evening fell, the two lovebirds went towards the mausoleum of the Quaid. The security guard once again became alert.

A medium-statured woman, standing alone in the jungle of concrete—who appeared to be unmarried and was perhaps a secretary or a computer operator at an office—was impatiently waiting for a bus. Then, two mean-faced persons with hungry eyes came over and suddenly stood beside her and touched her shoulders. The woman began to tremble with fear. The men, perhaps, uttered something indecent to her. Her eyes began to shed tears. Then she began to walk so fast that she was almost

running. The two men followed her and the noise of the traffic continued. Everyone remained busy with their problems and their routines. The traffic continued. A young man, wearing a dirty shirt without any buttons, was holding a bundle of newspapers. He wanted to snatch a box of tissues from a little child standing at the side of the road. The child probably sold tissues. The child resisted, and the young man slapped him with a heavy hand. A fountain of warm blood emitted from the child's lips and ears. A girl, standing nearby, whose intoxicating eyes were similar to those of the child and who was perhaps his sister, arrived to his aid. The young man pushed both of them. Both fell on each other. The child cried in terror. Then, he began to weep in helplessness. The box of tissues had been torn and the packets had been scattered on the road. Fragrant girls, with books in their hands, sitting in the university bus standing nearby began to laugh loudly, while some boys had their eyes glued to their mobile screens.

A man wearing a cap, whose face reflected an inferiority complex, pushed the veiled woman. Perhaps some quarrel had taken place between husband and wife. The whole body of the woman was covered. However, small eyes peeped through the veil. The two children with round faces also fell to the ground along with the woman. The woman was dumbfounded. The man, in the crowded bazaar, slapped her on her back with two heavy hands. Some customers on both sides perhaps heard this sound, but then continued doing their work. A bright-faced woman who had had a haircut a few hours ago was giving a speech from the dais in a beautiful tone, saying that women would have to fight for their rights and that they would have to give up being slaves to men and would have to make men realize that they existed. The hall echoed with the sound of clapping. This time, the hollow words did not penetrate the walls; rather, a summary of the speech of the woman became a headline in the newspapers of the city, and she was called a representative of positive change.

‘Please try to understand me. I am not saying that your child is weak in studies. If you pay the fee for four months, I can readmit him,’ the fat-bodied principal responded to a mother. The mother’s tone was characterized by pleading. She writhed in the chair and began to look at the principal with hopeful eyes that she might show some flexibility. The principal said, “Please don’t waste my time further”. The mother stood up and, as she was about to leave the room, a rich woman entered the room. The tone of the fat principal turned to flattery. ‘Please come in. Our school is running only because of your magnanimous donation.’ ‘My mission is the promotion of education.’ Both began to smile with pride, and the mother’s feet were exhausted by the tiredness of centuries.

An inhabitant of the City of Lights and a worried person, carrying his son on his shoulders, he entered a government hospital. He found the rusted gate locked with a big lock. The man shouted at the staff of a medical store. The staff looked at him with indifference. One of the staff members, leaning back in his chair, closed the small window very strongly. The man said, ‘My child will die. Please give him some medicine.’ Someone advised him to take the child to a private hospital. The man, at once, put his hand in his pocket and held two old one-hundred-rupee banknotes. Many doctors wore black bands in protest for an increase in their salaries. TV channels released news that the doctors of Karachi had announced the extension of their strike for another week.

The only bread-winner of five children pleaded with the owner of the factory, ‘Sir, ethnic riots in my area have become more violent in the last month. Terrorists shoot at those who come out of their houses. Now, I shall try to be regular this month onwards.’ The face of the factory-owner became sterner: rules are rules. Then, the cashier deducted two thousand rupees from the eight thousand due to the man and gave him six thousand rupees. The man came out of the gate with a helpless face. The



price of flour and rice began to dance in his mind. The owner lit a cigarette and, on his mobile, ordered a pizza costing half the man's salary—to have with his evening tea.

In the darkness of the night, when even the dogs slept, a middle-aged man, uncomfortable and restless because of his need for drugs, moved his eyes around quickly. Then, hanging onto the iron-railing at the island dividing the road, he tried to break it but the railing would not budge. The drug addict abandoned the railing after a long struggle. His need for drugs grew. He saw the lid on a manhole in the middle of the road. The addict lifted it up and ran away. In the morning, a four-year-old child fell into the manhole and died, but the drug addict kept sleeping peacefully. All were distraught at the incident. Some criticized the city government. Some attributed it to the negligence of the parents, while one or two columnists wrote columns about it in the evening dailies.

'You don't have any experience and we can't take risk employing inexperienced persons,' the officer, wearing a thick coat in the hot season in a chilled room, explained to the young man. 'But sir, I request that you grant me an opportunity. I have the capacity to learn.' 'But this is an age of competition. We cannot put the company at risk like this.' The face of the young man became gloomy. As soon as he came out of the cold room, and into the scorching heat, he felt the hot sand entering through the holes in the soles of his shoes. His eyes began to hurt and tears began to fall. The next day, the news was released that a young man had committed suicide because of his being jobless. Everyone condemned the suicide. The two-line news item became old the very next day; the old newspapers were sold to the wastepaper dealers.

'Driver, hurry up! Take the other road. Perhaps this road is blocked,' the old woman cried. 'These people don't even let an ambulance pass,' the driver said while keeping his hand on the steering wheel. The old man in the vehicle was perhaps the old

woman's husband. Their young daughter, sitting beside him, was looking at her father in a state of helplessness. The old man was writhing with severe pain in his heart. 'Madam, it is perhaps a VIP movement. It will certainly take half an hour.' A web of fear was spun in the eyes of the old woman. At a short distance, political leaders were riding in shining cars. 'The staff of the leaders are going abroad regarding an investigation into the bomb blast that took place in the city last month, so that the ruthless perpetrators may be given their due punishments. An agenda of solving the problem of unemployment, corruption, and terrorism is also to be discussed,' the radio in the vehicle announced.

'The head of the government is coming.' There was uproar in the city. The public began to dance in circles like monkeys. 'Sir, my problem! My problem!' The head of the government came and delivered an impassioned and fiery speech. The hands of the people became red from clapping again and again. He promised, 'Your children will get an education. Your women will be given their rights. Your young men will get jobs. The poor will be fed. The sick will be treated. Please give me your vote. I am your sympathetic brother, your father, your representative. Despair is equal to not believing in God.' All became hopeful. They passionately waved the party flags given by the workers of the leader. These flags bore his smiling picture. Afterwards, small shopping bags of spicy rice were distributed, and the people looted these bags and tore them open. Whatever someone got, he ate it. Other leaders were welcomed in other areas in a similar way. Several promises were made. Previous governments were accused, and former rulers were smeared with accusations. Some played music, and the public jumped and danced incongruously. It was as if their leaders were not human beings but angels who live in paradise.

A bold line appeared on the TV screen. The incidents of the whole day in the city had tired of whizzing around in my mind.

## CITY OF LIGHTS

My mind became heavier and a nameless despair began to dominate my whole being. I lit the last cigarette in the cigarette case; this time, I felt as if the smoke had penetrated into my soul.



## *The Story of the City of Karachi*

FARIDA RAHMAN

Karachiites! You know very well what Karachi was like; how it was a city of festivity and splendour. How safe its streets and bazaars were! What gatherings were held here! Poetry gatherings would be held. There was freedom for all kinds of entertainment and recreation, music and dance, theatre, cinema, and so on. The splendour of the city did not cease till late at night. Literary persons, and those who were passionate about knowledge and art, did not hesitate to express their thoughts. My relationship with the city of Karachi is very old. But, there was a time when I had not yet seen it. My father left for Karachi by train. He sent a postcard to us children from every railway station where the train stopped on its journey. Now, several other names, besides Karachi, had also become part of my memory. My ears became acquainted with Ghotki, Rohri, Khairpur, Nawab Shah, Tando Adam, Hyderabad, Kotri, Landhi, etc. On his return from Karachi, my father brought us boxes of *sohan halwa* and necklaces of oyster shells. Then, these tasty new sweets and whitish oyster shells became synonymous with Karachi for me.

I watched Karachi closely in the decade of the 1970s. In a way, this city found a deep place for itself in my heart; I considered it the most beautiful city in the world. I had never seen such things in my life. I found Karachi to be the most individualistic of all the cities in the entire country. The mood and temperament of Karachi were very different. Its nights and days were spent in their own way. It was always awake and thriving. Its designs and



embellishments were quite unique. Its way of living was also quite different.

We lived at Queens Road, and Nursery was quite far from there. Even then, we used to go there to eat *qulfi* (ice-cream) and *paan* (beetle leaf) and wear flower bracelets. Long queues of cars were a proof of the popularity of the place. People could be seen moving here and there, and chatting with one another without any worries. People used to visit one another at night. They came out of their houses after supper to call on their friends. Tea and coffee were taken in the company of friends. Travelling at night was safe because Karachi was the safest city in Pakistan. Taking a stroll outside, walking in parks at night, and going to the seashore to enjoy the sight of the full moon were common occurrences in the city. People trusted one another. These qualities of this city were without parallel.

It was not only the people of Karachi, but the breeze in this city was also free from any obstructions. High-rise blocks of flats had not yet been constructed. Most of the houses were spacious and surrounded by fruit trees. There was no pollution. There were no police blockades. No area was a no-go area. It was my Karachi—peaceful, safe, beautiful, and dignified. And then a time came when the land mafia eclipsed the beauty of the city, just like a drug mafia.

## *City of Blood*

FARHANA KHAN DIYA

Diya, while taking down the laundry earlier in her courtyard, had overheard Akash Afzal's mother, from the neighbouring house, talking to her son: 'Akash! Akash! Look, my son! I have forbidden you several times from making friends with boys older than you. Where do they take you in their expensive cars?'

And Akash said only one thing, 'Mummy! Don't worry about me. Now, I am a grown-up. I understand everything.'

Now, she saw the news on the TV screen: 'Akash Afzal has been kidnapped'. Diya's heart was anguished. She herself had children. She thought of going over to the house next door. Her husband had returned from the office. He had brought the newspaper. He said to Diya, 'As a neighbour, you should go to Akash's house.'

Diya said, 'I did go there. Various channels are also telecasting this news. But, first, I should get my blood pressure checked. Then, I shall spend the night with Akash's mother. May God help her find her child!'

When they had covered a distance of some furlongs on their motorcycle, going towards the hospital, Diya and her husband found the road had been blocked; a police station had been burnt. Students of colleges and university, sick people, labourers, and employees had all been besieged by vehicles for several hours. Slogans were being raised: 'Free Niaz Ali; otherwise, leave the city.' Unable to go further, both of them returned home.

Diya went to Akash's house instead of her own. Now, there was a crowd of women there. But they were whispering all kinds of things that could have happened. Diya took Akash's mother, who fell down in a faint again and again, into a separate room and asked the other women to leave her alone. Diya gave her water to drink and reassured her.

Then the woman told Diya, 'Niaz Ali, one of the boys of the *mohallah*, took Akash from the house, and Akash has not returned home after that. We pleaded with Niaz's family to tell us where our child is but they have made this issue an issue of honour and blamed us that we are accusing them. The burning fire of grief and separation from our son has made it impossible for us to live in peace. Therefore, we had an FIR issued against Niaz Ali. At this, they have gathered hundreds of people. They are protesting against the FIR because, perhaps, Niaz Ali's parents don't know that he wanders here and there with respectable persons who come in their cars, and our Akash also used to be among them. Diya, pray to God that He may reunite our Akash with us! Now, those who speak our language will protest tomorrow that, unless our child is found, we will not let Niaz Ali be released.'

The next day, the same thing happened. The road was blocked. Vehicles and buildings were damaged, but there was no trace of Akash. After two days, an advocate was murdered in that area. On the third day, dead bodies of children were found. On the fourth day, political assassinations were committed. On the fifth day, kidnappings were committed for ransom. The news about Akash faded into the background and took a back-seat to the daily news of further violence.

## *Identity Card*

AMJAD MUMTAZ

The villagers were as surprised as Akram Ali at how the doctor, an ordinary young man, had sent him to Karachi. The elderly people thought that Dr Irfan must have done so as a reward for Akram Ali's services to him. Then, they thought that he renders such services to every visitor at the three-roomed Neelam Rest House during the summer every year. His friends thought that Dr Irfan was making fun of him; some thought that Akram Ali might have rendered the guests another service besides meals. They did not say this openly, but they talked about it among themselves.

Three years had passed since Akram Ali's marriage to Zareena. He earned a livelihood for his wife and two children as a cook at the rest house during the summers. He had been making plans, for several years, to get a job in the Punjab in winter but, each year, he was faced with some problem. When his father married him off saying that the new daughter-in-law would bring him good luck for a job, Akram Ali believed his father. Now, after the passage of three years, though they had not yet found any permanent employment, they had found two children. This winter, his father died. His mother had already passed away. Thank God that his three sisters had their own homes.

Upon the arrival of summer, people began to come to stay at the Neelam Rest House. Akram Ali requested each of them to help him find a job. Dr Irfan was one of the visitors, but he was very different from the people in his group. He had a small black beard. His moustache was so thick that his upper lip remained



hidden by it. He spoke less than the others. When Akram Ali requested Dr Irfan, he said, 'I shall find a job for you in Karachi and will inform you. You keep yourself ready for it. Don't worry!'

Akram spent several days listening to the counsel of his fellow villagers, collecting the addresses of acquaintances in Karachi, and hearing the news of the bad situation in Karachi. 'Look, Zareena, you needn't worry. A man has to leave his house for his livelihood. I will come back after every three months and will write you letters. Take care of Shahid and Zahid. God will set things right. Please stay in touch with the relatives. Sharing sorrows and joys is necessary.'

Zareena listened to Akram Ali silently. Zahid was asleep at her bosom, and the last piece of firewood was smouldering in the grate. 'Look, take care of yourself. There is a lot of rush of vehicles in cities, and I'm afraid of them. Never sit on the roof of a vehicle,' Zareena said in a terrified tone. 'Oh, my dear wife! I am not a child. I have been to Rawalpindi several times. I went to Lahore once. Do I not know how to walk on roads?' Akram Ali said laughingly.

In the morning, he took a last look at the village from the roof of his house, kissed the children, and left carrying a tin trunk containing his belongings. When he reached the bus stop, he began to remember the past. He continued thinking about Zareena and the children; the journey till Muzaffarabad was spent in such thoughts. From there, he took a bus to Rawalpindi; it was evening when he arrived in Rawalpindi. According to the advice of some elderly people, he took a train from Rawalpindi late that night.

Travelling by train was, indeed, a new experience for him. This journey was different from all the previous journeys. He felt as if the people sitting in the second class were like him, searching for their own destinations. Each passenger's luggage lay in front of him. Several had brought water-filled coolers and food items

with them. The noise of the children could be heard along with the noise of the train. He felt good about all this. Even when he felt uneasy, sometimes, he lost himself in dreams of the future. And, when he awoke with a jerk, he at once checked his trunk, placed under the seat, and then began to dream once again. He knew that his worries would end after he reached Karachi because Dr Irfan had written that he would come to receive him at the railway station. On Dr Irfan's instruction, Akram Ali had told him about his date of departure in a letter from the village and, as a precaution, had kept his Karachi address with him. When he began to feel tired, he suddenly thought about what would happen if he wasn't able to find Dr Irfan's hospital. It was not easy to find a place to live in such a big city.

He began to think, 'There must be some good people in these big cities. I shall get a place to live somewhere. I will find a place to live, in case I fail to find Dr Irfan.' After all, his fellow villagers living here were earning their livelihoods. Some of them would surely help him. The dry wood in the stove of hopes began to catch fire and he began to see Zareena, with both their children sitting in front of her, blowing the stove, her face reddening. She was making dough balls of maize flour and was cooking the bread on the pan. He arrived in Karachi thinking these thoughts.

The cool light of the morning had enveloped the city. He heard the same sounds at Karachi railway station that he had heard at Rawalpindi and Lahore stations. He went to a hotel in front of the station, carrying his trunk. Putting it down, he sat there to drink tea. When the boy brought the tea, Akram Ali put the paper, which had the address of Dr Irfan's hospital on it, in front of him because he had not found Dr Irfan at the station. The boy reassured him and, after receiving the money for the tea, sat Akram Ali in a minibus numbered 22. When the bus stopped in front of the hospital, Akram Ali quickly got off the bus carrying his trunk and entered the hospital.



In front of the door, behind a glass, a girl was talking to someone on a phone. The door had the word 'Reception' on it in red. A card hung on the left pocket of the girl's white coat; the card had her photograph and something in English written on it. As soon as she saw Akram Ali, she ended the phone call and said, 'Where are you going, mister?'

'Madam, I have to see Dr Irfan. He had given me this address. He came to Neelam village last summer. He told me that he would give me employment at the hospital,' Akram Ali said in one breath. 'Please let me see him. This is my identity card.' He held out his card, while looking at hers.

'It seems that you have arrived today,' the girl said, while looking at him.

'Yes, madam, but how did you know that?' Akram Ali became happy.

'I just knew.' The girl became silent. 'It is evident from your face,' she said, after a while.

'But, madam, will you kindly arrange my meeting with him? He knows me very well,' Akram said this very anxiously.

'Brother, Dr Irfan Majeed has died.'

'What? What are you saying? He was quite young. He invited me to attend his wedding. It cannot be so. For God's sake! How did it happen?'

'But it has happened. The day before yesterday, when Dr Irfan was coming for his night duty, some unknown motorcyclists shot him dead and went away. There was a strike at the hospital yesterday.'

A veil of darkness fell in front of Akram Ali's eyes, and he felt very ill-fated. What kind of fate was this that his duty took the life of the pious and angel-natured Dr Irfan! The flowers of the

Dr Irfan's garland were transferred to the tomb of his desires, and the joyous songs had been suppressed by the sound of the rains of Neelam. He felt as if it was raining heavily, and he could not leave his house owing to the thunder and lightning. The roof of despair was continuously dripping as he stood wiping his tears in the hospital.

The girl said, 'Brother, you can go to his house. I shall give you the address of his house.' But, Akram Ali had nothing to do with his house. Therefore, he dragged his feet and, carrying his trunk, went out onto the road. His was in a very strange state. Not only was the puzzle of Dr Irfan's death incomprehensible to him, but he was also feeling an unfamiliar pain over the news. When he tried to get rid of that anguish, his uncertain future loomed in front of him like a mountain. While making his way through the crowd on the road, he was not only searching for his future but for the hotel—among the thousands of shops—owned by the village councillor's son. The councillor had given him the address of his son's hotel: Ghareeb Nawaz Hotel, Saddar, Karachi, No. 3.

The sight of the rushing vehicles, in front of him, reminded him of what Zareena had said. Row after row of vehicles was visible as far as he could see as he was trying to cross the road and follow the traffic signals. Meanwhile, he suddenly caught sight of a board: 'Ghareeb Nawaz Hotel'. He stopped himself from shouting with joy. As he dashed forward, a minibus moving at great speed hit him and his tin trunk fell far from him. He lay, drenched in blood, on the road. His skull had been split into many pieces. In no time, people gathered around the dead body and a crowd advanced towards the minibus. The driver tried to drive the minibus away through the crowd, but the people caught the driver and set the bus on fire. The owner of the Ghareeb Nawaz Hotel also came out, and the process of identifying the body begun. Someone took the blood-smeared national identity card out of Akram Ali's shirt and told the owner of Ghareeb Nawaz Hotel, 'He belongs to your village.' The



## *The Golden Season of Memories*

ANDALEEB ZAHRA

Saeeda's memories were attached to Mauripur—Mauripur which has now become Masroor Colony but, to her, will always remain Mauripur—which is still alive in her imagination, filled with the golden memories of beautiful relationships.

*October 1965*

There is at least one advantage to being in the army—the opportunity to visit each and every corner of the country. Sometimes in Risalpur, sometimes in Dhaka, sometimes in Quetta, sometimes in Sukkur! This time, they were at the cantonment in Karachi and all the family members were excited. They rejoiced at the fact that they would be able to see the beach for real. They had only seen the beach in pictures and films in which Nadeem and Shabnam sang tragic songs. Saeeda and her brothers and sisters had already begun to memorize the names of the places: Bunder Road, Tariq Road, Keamari, Manora, etc.

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the heirs of the murdered cannot be given any compensation by the driver. However, legal proceedings can be instituted against the minibus driver for driving carelessly. And, with this, the proceedings of the court are concluded.'

## *Sealed Lips*

SHERIN ZADA KHADUKHEL

Perhaps, like me, countless acquaintances of his would try to find out what had happened to Shah Ji as a result of which he had switched sides within one night. You should also know about this, since you may also be one of Shah Ji's acquaintances: the distinguished political, social, charitable, and business personality, Shah Ji, has joined another party. At the time of joining the new party, he said in his brief address, "I am leaving my previous party because I am not happy with the attitudes of its leaders. It is for this reason that I have quit that party and have joined this new party. It promotes democratic values."

But, the irony was that this news had been given the following strange headline: 'Not Big Words Out of a Small Mouth, But Small Words Out of a Big Mouth'. When there is such a damaging headline about Shah Ji, why doesn't he speak up for himself? Two sons of Shah Ji's have moved to another country. He fears for their lives. He has an established business. Here, he has one son and one daughter with him. Most of Shah Ji's activities are political, social, charitable, and literary. I had never expected such a reaction from him. I considered him to be a very honest, sincere, brave, and determined person. I thought that Shah Ji could break but not bend. But then, suddenly, Shah Ji changed his attitude like this!

Karachi has a strange mood. Everyone thinks of himself. No one cares about the country. Everyone is busy making money for himself. The city's atmosphere has been filled with such viciousness that even the mosquitoes of this city bite like dogs.



It seems very likely that the previous party might have refused to allot a ticket to him for the next elections, and the other party might have promised to give him a ticket.

Finally, Shah Ji came over to meet me. I was hesitant to ask about the issue, and he continued to avoid it. But, at last, the subject spilled from my tongue. I asked, and he remained quiet for some time. It seemed as if he was either suffering from some confusion or he was not willing to share it with me. Then he said, in a low and defeated tone, 'I had great confidence in myself. I had great pride in myself. I had faith in myself. I was arrogant. Perhaps God did not like my pride—I fell, I broke into pieces, I was scattered. But, tell me, if someone threatens you that your young college-going daughter will be kidnapped and it will be made public that she has eloped with her lover . . . and that your young son will be thrown from the fifth floor and the news will go out that he has committed suicide out of shame over his sister . . . then what would you do?'

'What . . . what . . . ?' My throat had dried. I felt I was choking. I felt a need to drink water. I sat beside Shah Ji, terrified. My hand was on his shoulder. Anything can happen in this city and it can be attributed to anyone without any difficulty—if not a political party then extortion money collectors, robbers, stray bullets, domestic strife, traffic accidents. My body felt like it had deflated and been drained of blood. My legs were trembling. I remained silent.

Shah Ji has moved to another country to which he does not belong. Now, he belongs only to his children.



## *Sudden Death*

SYEDA ITRAT BATOOL NAQVI

I was flabbergasted. How can it be so? How can it be possible? Were my eyes mistaken? It was indeed so.

I was standing in front of a mirror, looking at the reflection of a man of my stature. The mirror was quite clear but I didn't look like the real me in the mirror. Having dived into a sea of doubt, I began to comfort myself that there must be a problem with the mirror.

I glanced all around in search of another mirror. It was a very beautiful hotel, situated in a posh area of the city. At that time, there was hardly anyone there and silence prevailed. People had probably gone into their rooms after having supper, and the tired hotel staff were performing their usual tasks. Perhaps, the night had become too humid. At last, I caught sight of another mirror in the corridor and stood in front of it. I was completely confused. The mirror was quite clear, but it was not reflecting my image. What was this? I was dumbstruck. Perhaps my eyes were not working properly. But, I could see all other things quite clearly.

Then, I saw a man who was probably the manager of the hotel. I ran towards him. 'Brother, listen to me,' I called to him. But, he continued walking. He did not pay any attention to me. 'Listen to me,' I cried aloud but he had gone out through the front door of the hotel. Now, I was also outside. There were men, women, and children all around. But no one looked at me. I became certain that I was not visible to anyone. I gave up

trying to be heard or seen. I was sitting on a bench, in a park, trying to remember where I was, where I had come from, and why there was a strange coldness inside my head.

Gradually, the mist dispersed from my mind and I recalled everything. I began to drown in a flood of gloom and anguish. What I remembered was very painful. But it was reality. It had happened so. Several hours had passed since my death. Yes, I had died. I remembered the whole incident of my dying. I had been the target of a stray bullet, and had died on the spot. There was no chance of taking me to hospital. Why did it happen to me? What was my fault? There was no hatred in my heart for anyone. I had big dreams. I wanted to do so much in my life. But I was made to die before my time.

I remembered very well that I had returned home after sitting my last matriculation exam. I was very happy. My mother made my favourite dish. After having my meal, I said to my mother, 'Mother, I will take a long nap today because I have slept little during the last few days while I was preparing for the examinations.'

She said, 'My dear daughter, I am worried about the situation outside. The condition in the city is very alarming. Our city is burning. Don't go to your friend's house today.' I did go to my friend's house after I woke up. What was my fault? Why was I killed? I remembered that I had died. I had been murdered. I had been killed for no reason. My dreams had been shattered.

I remembered that it was the last day of my life and my friends and I had gathered at Samina's house. After having lunch, we went out for a stroll. Suddenly, there was a wild commotion. I did not know what was happening. My body was trembling. Blood was gushing out of my body fast. In my last moments, I saw the whitened and terrified faces of my friends.

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## *The Golden Season of Memories*

ANDALEEB ZAHRA

Saeeda's memories were attached to Mauripur—Mauripur which has now become Masroor Colony but, to her, will always remain Mauripur—which is still alive in her imagination, filled with the golden memories of beautiful relationships.

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Saeeda closed her album of memories. The two years spent in Karachi were the most beautiful years of her life—when there was peace in Karachi. There was love among the people. There was sincerity.



Now, there is blood and fire. There is hatred and sectarianism.

But, the Karachi existing in Saeeda's imagination is still alive, with the same splendour, in which peace, security, and open-mindedness welcomed newcomers into its embrace and the doors of employment were open to all.

There was breaking news on TV: 'Unknown armed men have shot 16 people dead in Gulistan-e-Jauhar, Karachi.'

## *This is Your Own City*

RABIA TABASSUM

Her father had come to the examination centre to take her home. 'Amna, please hurry up! There is unrest in the city today.'

'Daddy, I did very well in the exam today.' Her father was very happy to hear that. Why would he be happy? He was proud of all his three daughters.

'Come on, *beti*.' They got on the bus. The father sat at the back and the daughter in the front. And then, suddenly, there was screaming and crying. There was the sound of firing everywhere. She screamed and ran towards the back of the bus. Her father was lying, covered in blood. Her strong father was lying in a helpless state.

'For God's sake, save my father! For God's sake!' She was crying. But there was no one to help her. 'Aunty, look! Please help me! Please, for God's sake! For God's sake!' She kept crying, and tears continued to fall from her eyes. Her cries were drowned out by the sirens of ambulances. The exam essay that she had been so proud of was about the spirit of love and fraternity in the city. It was titled 'This is your own city'.

In another part of the city, Gul Zameen had been happy that day, too. He was very happy because the school children had bought many balloons and a lot of roasted maize. 'I shall get a new pair of shoes for my daughter, Bakht Zameen,' he thought while pushing his cart along. 'Today, I shall give my wife, Shireen, some extra money. She is very patient. She does not complain about her torn *dupatta*.' He and his thoughts were

walking along with each other. Then, there was firing. He saw blood gushing from his body. At once, he took money out of the money box and put it into the pocket of his dirty shirt. There was confusion all around. People were running here and there. No one knew what was happening. Ambulances arrived. The pocket was searched and some five- and ten-rupee banknotes, smeared in blood, were found.

This is the city of Karachi—that was once known as the City of Lights. Today, it is what the breaking news on television tells us: it is the city of violence and target killings.



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Translated from the Urdu story, '*Yeh Shehr Tumhara Apna Hai*'.

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# KARACHI

## Our Stories in Our Words

Edited by *Maniza Naqvi*

The book is a collection of stories and voices from all over Karachi, written for a story-writing competition arranged by Oxford University Press Pakistan—and is based on the idea that everyone has a good story to tell. These stories, written by many individuals separately, together chronicle the city and its life.

Karachi as a cosmopolitan city of prosperity and opportunity is a strong theme—a city where people from all over the country and continent mingle and live in close proximity. There are stories of kindness and empathy. And there are themes of deep income disparity and social injustice. There is nostalgia for a time gone by in Karachi, a new awareness of its past history, a love of the beach and the sea. There is deep pain in these stories—of the loss of loved ones, of violence and murder and target killings—and a real sense of belief and hope for a better future.

**Maniza Naqvi** is a writer. Her works include four novels, *Mass Transit*, *On Air*, *Stay With Me*, *A Matter of Detail*, and a book of short stories *Sarajevo Saturdays*. She has also compiled and edited *Festival!* for the Karachi Literature Festival 2012. Born in Lahore, she spends her time between New York and Karachi.

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